

HOUR OF JUDGMENT

Gregory O. Scott

For Mike and Tim

Tying up the loose ends.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE NEW REPUBLIC

Admiral Ackbar, Supreme Commander (Mon Cal male from Dac)

Mon Mothma, councilor (human female from Chandrila)

Leia Organa, councilor (human female from Alderaan)

Borsk Fey'lya, councilor (Bothan male from Kothlis)

Admiral Willham Burke, Third Fleet (human male from Corellia)

General Airen Cracken, NRI Director (human male from Contruum)

Winter, NRI agent (human female from Alderaan)

ROGUE SQUADRON

Commander Wedge Antilles, Rogue Leader (human male from Corellia)

Captain Tycho Celchu, XO (human male from Alderaan)

Lieutenant Wes Janson (human male from Taanab)

Lieutenant Hobbie Klivian (human male from Ralltiir)

Xarce Huwla (Tunroth female from Saloch)

Avan Beruss (human male from Illodia)

Feylis Ardele (human female from Commenor)

Nrin Vakil (Quarren male from Dac)

Soontir Fel (human male from Corellia)

ALPHA BLACK

Admiral Hiram Drayson, program director (Human male from Chandrila)

Reyan Dey'rylan, squad leader (Bothan male from Thoran)

Kasck Frei'leir (Bothan male from Bothawui)

Sho-tev Ekhrine (Em'liy male from Shalyvane)

Jekk Karr (human male from Generis)

Devin Torr (human male from Esseles)

THE GALACTIC EMPIRE

Ysanne Isard, regent and Intelligence director (human female from Coruscant)

Grand Admiral Octavian Grant (human male from Fondor)

Grand Admiral Afsheen Makati (human male from Cartao)

Grand Admiral Thrawn (Chiss male from Csilla)

Captain Dagon Niriz, *Grey Wolf* (human male from Alsakan)

Grand Moff Ardus Kaine (human male from Sartinaynian)

High Inquisitor Jerec (Miraluka male from Coruscant)

F-4GR, Makati's protocol droid

HAND OF JUDGMENT

Daric LaRone, squad leader (Human male from Copperline)

Sabera Marcoss, XO (Human male from Shelkonwa)

Korlo Brightwater, scout (Human male from Vendaxa)

Taxtro Grave, sniper (Human male from Entralla)

Joak Quiller, pilot (Human male from Exodeen)

CIVILIANS

Syal Antilles Fel, former actress (human female from Corellia)

Leonia Tavira, pirate (human female from Eiattu VI)

Van Tyrac, pirate (human male from Susevfi)

*“There comes an hour for every good soldier
when he must judge whether the cause he
serves is truly worth his life.”*

PRELUDE: COMMAND DECISION

BY TIMOTHY ZAHN

They had left the Core Worlds a dozen jumps ago, setting off across the Outer Rim Territories with its barbarians and non-human monsters and thinly-veiled contempt for the glory and benevolence that was the Empire. Four jumps ago they had left behind even that pale caricature of civilization to enter the sparsely charted region called Wild Space. Now, with this final jump, the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* had left even that behind.

Ahead of them lay the Unknown Regions. Behind them lay the Empire. And, for all practical purposes, the ruins of their careers.

"Forward sensors reporting, Captain," an officer called from the starboard crew pit. "No signs of spacecraft."

"Acknowledged," Captain Dagon Niriz said, glowering out the bridge viewport at the dull red sun glowing in the near distance. The dying embers of a once glorious star. How very symbolic. "Launch TIE fighter squadron," he ordered. "As per the admiral's orders."

"Yes, sir." There was a footstep beside him. "Well, there it is," General Larr Haverel commented. "Our new tour of duty. Looks so very inviting, doesn't it?"

"Looks so very like slow death," Niriz said bluntly.

"Yes," Haverel murmured. "I suppose slow death is just what happens when you come down on the wrong side of Imperial Palace politics."

Niriz nodded sourly. He'd seen it happen himself, time and time again: intrigues and squabbings among the aides and

advisors and sycophants of the Imperial court as they forever jockeyed for the Emperor's ear and favor. The tension between two sides could sometimes build for years, then suddenly come to a head and be over in a matter of days or even hours, with the loser and his allies either executed or- if the winners were feeling particularly lenient that day- sent packing off to effective exile on some mudwater world like Abregado or Tatooine.

And the admiral had been right in the middle of the game, so the gossip said, playing it with zest and a certain degree of finesse. To have pulled this exploration and mapping assignment in the Unknown Regions, he must have lost big.

But that was no reason why Niriz and Haverel and the rest of the *Admonitor's* crew had to lose with him. No reason at all.

Out of the corner of his eye, Niriz saw the officers in the starboard crew pit stiffen, their attention shifting aft. Niriz stayed where he was, watching the dark shapes of the TIE fighters as they realigned into search formation, until he heard the soft footstep on the command walkway behind him. "Admiral," he said, only then turning around.

It was indeed, as he'd surmised, Admiral Thrawn. "Captain," the admiral said in that carefully cultured voice of his. "Report."

"We've arrived, sir," Niriz said shortly, eying him with the mixture of fascination and distaste that had followed Thrawn ever since Captain Voss Parck had found him on some mudwater planet out here in the Unknown Regions and brought him back to the Imperial Court. Basically man-shaped, Thrawn's blue skin and glowing red eyes nevertheless marked him emphatically as an alien. And the Emperor did not like aliens.

Parck should have been disciplined or executed on the spot for that kind of arrogance. The only reason he hadn't been was that Thrawn had apparently turned out to be quite a competent tactician and strategist. He'd been given private Academy training, risen with dramatic speed through the ranks, and ultimately been made a command officer.

The Emperor had tolerated his presence. Why, Niriz never knew. Others in the court- a great many others- had not.

"Yes, I see that," Thrawn said dryly, those glittering eyes shifting momentarily over Niriz's shoulder. "But those fighters should be further out by now. How soon after our arrival did you order them launched?"

"Immediately, sir," Niriz said, striving to keep his voice civil. Whether he liked this assignment or not, he was still an Imperial officer, and he obeyed orders. "There might have been some trouble with the pre-launch check list- the crews aren't used to dealing with the hyperdrives on these new TIE scouts."

"If so, it's a deficiency they need to correct," Thrawn said. "Launch practice, Captain, beginning now. Please see to it personally."

Niriz ground his teeth. "Yes, sir," he managed, catching the eye of the comm officer. "Call Commander Parck to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." Niriz looked back at Thrawn, a small touch of spiteful satisfaction flickering through him. Parck might not have been disciplined at the time, but Thrawn's enemies hadn't forgotten him.

Once the captain of his own *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, he'd been summarily stripped of that command, demoted to commander, and put aboard the *Admonitor* as Niriz's first officer. Served him right.

The admiral was watching him, an unreadable expression on his alien face. "I gather, Captain, that you don't consider this mission worthwhile."

"No, sir, I don't," Niriz said, lowering his voice out of habit to keep his words from the ears of those in the crew pits. Differences between senior officers were none of the lower ranks' business. "If I may speak freely, I think it's a complete waste of the Empire's time and energy and resources. With reports of unrest cropping up all across the Empire, sending a fully equipped Star Destroyer out here on mapping duty is just plain stupid."

"Perhaps," Thrawn said. If he was offended by Niriz's boldness, his expression didn't show it. "On the other hand, the Empire is a living entity. All living entities must grow if they're to survive."

"There's plenty of room for growth within our own borders," Niriz countered. "There must be hundreds of worlds back there we've hardly even glanced at."

"The Exploration Corps can deal with those," Thrawn said with a hint of disdain. "The Unknown Regions are the future of the Empire, Captain. It's only fitting that the Imperial Fleet lead the way."

Niriz bit down on his tongue. Thrawn was putting a good front on it, he had to give him that. Perhaps he'd even convinced himself that he hadn't in fact lost that last political fight. "Of course," he said aloud. "Sir."

A movement at the archway leading to the aft bridge caught his eye: Commander Parck had arrived. "With your permission, Admiral, I'll start the hangar bay crews on their practice."

"Very good, Captain," Thrawn said, his eyes again on the starscape outside. "Have them concentrate on pre-launch drills for the moment. I don't think we'll be spending more than an hour or two in this system, and I don't want the TIEs caught outside when we're ready to jump."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. Stepping past the blue-skinned alien, he stalked back down the command walkway, seething quietly to himself. To send the ship's captain to deal personally with TIE fighter crews was almost as demeaning as a public slap in the face. No wonder Thrawn had gotten himself exiled out here. The only mystery was what had taken the Imperial Courtiers so long to do it.

They were on their fifteenth system when they found their first sign of intelligent life. Or rather, when it found them.

"There are three of them, Captain," the sensor officer reported. "About twenty-five meters long- roughly the size of an Oracian customs frigate. Unfamiliar configuration; unknown weaponry."

"Acknowledged," Niriz said, standing on the command walkway with Thrawn and Parck and gazing out at the approaching spacecraft. An alien design, but with the compact and nimble-looking shape of fighters. One squadron of TIE fighters was already on their way out of the hangar

bay, with a second standing by. "TIE control: order advance squadron to warn them back."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said before the officer could acknowledge. "Advance squadron is to take up open escort formation ahead of the *Admonitor*. Comm officer, key external signal to my comlink."

He pulled his comlink cylinder from one of his tunic chest pockets. "I trust you realize those ships out there are probably armed," Niriz warned him.

"Oh, I'm sure they are," Thrawn agreed.

"Then shouldn't we do something about that?" Niriz asked, striving for patience.

"We're at full battle alert," Thrawn reminded him. "For now, that should be sufficient." He lifted his comlink and thumbed it on. "Unidentified spacecraft, this is the Alderaanian Colony Ship *Admonitor*. If you understand, please respond."

He switched off the comlink.

"Colony Ship?" Niriz repeated with a frown.

"We're a rather imposing sight," Thrawn pointed out. "I don't want our size to frighten them away."

Niriz looked back at the approaching fighters. Not only did the admiral not want to fight, he didn't even want to worry them. Maybe he'd change his mind when they blew off the command superstructure. "And you're expecting them to understand Basic?"

"They're close enough to Wild Space to have run into traders or smugglers from the Empire," Thrawn said. "If they haven't, I know a couple other languages we can try."

Abruptly, the bridge was filled with noisy static. "Hello, Colony Ship," a wheezing voice said. "I am Creysis, ruler of this system and lord of all I survey. How dare you invade my realm without my permission?"

"More ships, " the sensor officer called. "Incoming from around that small moon to portside. Twenty... thirty... thirty-eight of them total. One larger ship, bulk freighter size, falling in behind them."

"Launch second TIE squadron," Niriz ordered. "And have two more squadrons prepped immediately."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said again. "Have advance squadron pull back to tight escort formation."

"Sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider," Niriz said, one hand clenching into a frustrated fist. Did this blue-skinned alien understand nothing about standard tactics? "The whole purpose of a fighter screen is to engage the enemy at a safe distance and force him to disclose his weaponry."

"I'm aware of that, thank you," Thrawn said, his attention clearly on the approaching fleet. "Don't worry, they're not going to attack. Not until they have a better idea of our capabilities."

He switched on his comlink again. "Our apologies, Creysis," he said. "We didn't realize we were intruding. We'll leave at once, of course, as soon as our exploration ships are back aboard."

The static returned. "I accept your apologies," Creysis wheezed. "What exactly is it you seek?"

"A new home for our colonists," Thrawn said. "One which would not intrude on you or anyone else, of course. Would you happen to know of any such worlds?"

"I might," Creysis said. "Perhaps we should meet personally for a discussion."

"That would be most generous of you," Thrawn said. "May I offer the hospitality of the *Admonitor* for a meeting?"

"As a token of my trust, I will come," the wheezing voice said. "I will have my transport prepared at once."

"I'll look forward to meeting you," Thrawn said. "Farewell."

He switched off the comlink and returned it to his chest pocket. "Order two TIEs to remain outside to escort our visitor into the hangar bay, " he instructed the fighter control officer. "The rest will return to the hangar bay but remain on alert. All stations will continue at battle readiness."

"Yes, sir."

"Commander Parck, you'll stay here," Thrawn continued. "Captain Niriz, come with me. We have preparations to make before our guests arrive."

Niriz hadn't expected Creysis to be naive enough to board an unknown ship alone, and he was right. When the piercing

squeal of the alien gas-drive landing jets finally faded away there were five alien ships resting on the Number 3 hangar bay deck: four of the fighters they'd first encountered forming a square around a smaller one-man craft.

Or rather, a one-alien craft. The being that emerged was large, ungraceful, and- in Niriz's opinion- fairly revolting. His misshapen head was hairless and noseless, with oval eyes that seemed to be set too far apart across its face and a puckering mouth ringed with undulating, worm-like tentacles. From a distance his skin appeared pinkish; close up, Niriz could see that it was in fact a creamy white background covered with a crisscrossing pattern of delicate red lines. He was dressed in a long vest of dark-furred animal skins sewn together in an apparently haphazard pattern. Hanging around his neck on a cord was a bent-teardrop pendant of gold scattered with colored gems; strapped conspicuously at his side was a large hand weapon.

"I am Creysis," he wheezed as he lumbered toward the Imperials waiting for him. "Which one commands?"

"I do, " Thrawn said, taking half a step forward. "I am called Thrawn. This is Captain Niriz, in command of the *Admonitor* itself."

"Ah," Creysis said, coming to a stop two meters away. For a moment the mouth worms wiggled a little more vigorously, perhaps sampling odors or sounds. "How many colonists have you?"

"Forty thousand," Thrawn said. "Plus seven thousand crewmen who run the ship. Do you know of any planets nearby we might be able to colonize?"

"Not so quickly, red-eyes," Creysis said, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Before talk do you not honor me with a gift?"

"Of course," Thrawn said, signaling to one of the troopers hanging a few meters back. The other stepped forward and handed the admiral a small box.

"I see from your pendant that you appreciate beautiful things," Thrawn said, opening the box and lifting out a delicately carved golden sculpture. "Please accept this as a token of our honor toward you."

"It is indeed beautiful," Creysis said, not making a move to take it. "But my wish was for a different gift."

"My apologies," Thrawn said. "Have you suggestions?"

"One of those." Creysis lifted his right arm, bent tightly, and pointed the elbow toward one of the TIE fighters standing ready.

Thrawn shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you one of those," he said. "We have a limited number of exploration ships, and the path we will have to take before we reach our final destination is still very uncertain. If it would soothe your feelings, though, I could offer you a second or even a third sculpture. We have many such items aboard for use as trade goods."

"That will not be necessary," Creysis said. Again the mouth worms wiggled; then, with an elaborate shrug that seemed to start at his hips and run all the way to the top of his shoulders, he stepped forward and plucked the sculpture from Thrawn's hands. "Perhaps when you have settled to your new world you will have an exploration ship to spare me."

"Perhaps," Thrawn said. "Though that would of course depend on how quickly we find such a world."

"Of course," Creysis agreed. "Have you a list of parameters for the world you seek?"

"I shall convene the Council of Colonists immediately," Thrawn said. "I'm sure they'll be able to come up with a proper list."

"Prepare it at your leisure," Creysis said, taking a step back toward his transport. "Make sure it is exactly what you want. When it is ready, you may bring it to me at my command ship." The worms wiggled. "When you come, be certain you are also prepared to strike a bargain."

"What do you mean, a bargain?" Niriz asked.

Creysis eyed him. "Do you expect a world for free, white-head?" he sniffed, the wheezing taking on an edge of contempt. "If you wish your journey shortened by me, you must pay for the information."

"I understand," Thrawn assured him. "The Council of Colonists will arrive fully prepared to deal with you."

The mouth worms stiffened one last time, then Creysis turned and stalked into his ship. Thrawn motioned the Imperials back; and with another gale blast of gas-drive landing jets, the five alien ships lifted from the deck and made their way out the hangar entry port.

"Evaluation, Captain?" Thrawn asked.

"They're obviously primitives," Niriz sniffed, strongly tempted to quote for him the old Imperial dictum that all non-humans were primitives. "Animal-skin clothing, and rather haphazardly put together."

"Yet the seam lines were straight and used a slender thread," Thrawn said. "I'd say the unevenness in the pattern was likely part of the style. Anything else?"

"They don't seem to have repulsorlifts," Niriz said. "But they make up for it in weaponry. I counted at least ten laser barrels on each of those fighters."

"Ten barrels, yes," Thrawn said. "But I suspect no more than two of them were actually lasers. The tips on the other eight looked more suited to projectile weapons or even focused sensors. What about our visitor himself?"

Niriz looked out at the departing alien ships, wanting very much to tell Thrawn that none of this was really very important. But something in the admiral's tone or manner demanded a thoughtful answer.

"Very confident," he said. "Arrogant, even. Typical of a barbarian leader, whether he's got anything to back up the bluster or not. You're not seriously going to send a delegation into his ship, are you?"

"He was willing to come here," Thrawn pointed out. "Refusing to reciprocate might be taken as an insult."

Niriz snorted. "I imagine you can guess how much I care about that."

"More to the point, we're here to explore," Thrawn said. "This is our chance to learn more about these people, and perhaps learn something about the immediate area."

Niriz grimaced, but Thrawn was right. "May I recommend, sir, that we at least try to find out what we're up against. We have three sensor-stealthed assault shuttles aboard- let me send one of them around the back of that moon and see how many ships Creysis has."

"If that was actually their main base, that might tell us something," Thrawn agreed. "But it isn't. Tell me, Captain, you've been dealing closely with the *Admonitor's* TIE pilots for the past few days. Is there anyone in particular you'd consider especially good under fire?"

Niriz frowned, the sudden change in subject throwing him momentarily off track. "Lieutenant Klar's very good," he said. "Excellent pilot, very cool."

"Have him and two other TIE pilots report to my command room in an hour," Thrawn said. "And have General Haverel detail six of his troopers to meet with me at that same time. Same criteria."

Six men especially good under fire. Thrawn's mythical Council of Colonists, undoubtedly. "Yes, sir, " Niriz said stiffly. "May I again suggest, Admiral, that this might instead be the time for a show of strength. An assault shuttle with a squad or two of stormtroopers aboard, perhaps, plus a full wing of TIEs to escort them."

"Recommendation noted, Captain," Thrawn nodded. "Carry out your orders."

Niriz clenched his teeth briefly. "Yes, sir."

Nodding again, Thrawn turned and headed at a brisk walk toward the archway leading from the hangar bay proper to the cavernous service and maintenance area behind it. The bustling activity seemed to part before him, service techs and engineers stepping respectfully out of his way and, more often than not, staring furtively after him as he passed.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Niriz turned and stalked toward the turbolifts. He didn't like any of this, but service in the Imperial Fleet wasn't something you did if you happened to be in the mood that day. He and the *Admonitor* had been given an assignment; and if it meant putting up with a capricious alien commander, then they'd just have to put up with him.

At least, for now.

"Three of the alien fighters have appeared from the far side of the moon," the sensor officer called. "Swinging around the shuttle and TIE fighter escort and dropping into an outer escort formation."

"Acknowledged," Thrawn said. "Watch for more of them."

"If they haven't all fallen asleep from boredom," Niriz muttered to General Haverel standing beside him. He and Haverel had supplied the personnel Thrawn had requested well within the admiral's specified one-hour time limit. But then, for some unexplained reason, Thrawn had taken another three hours to get this whole charade moving and out into space.

But now they were finally off. And with the alien fighters forming escort around them, the gamble had begun. With six troopers, a *Zeta*-class long-range shuttle, and three irreplaceable TIE fighters set out on the betting line.

And along with them, Commander Parck. Niriz gazed out at the distant drive trails of the Imperial ships and the fainter drives of the alien fighters flying beside them, still not believing Thrawn had given such a risky assignment to a man who was supposed to be his friend or at least his ally. But then, perhaps Thrawn didn't see it that way.

Alien minds- who really knew how they worked?

"Creysis's command ship has made its appearance," the officer continued. "Also coming from behind the moon. Looks like a hangar bay's opened just behind and beneath the nose. "

Pressed tightly against the side of his leg, Niriz's fingertips rubbed restlessly back and forth across the material as he watched Parck's shuttle maneuver into the dark opening. In the past three hours the *Admonitor*'s drift had taken it a considerable distance from Creysis's headquarters moon. If the alien was planning treachery, it would be precious minutes before either the Star Destroyer or its TIE fighters could get there to help.

He'd pointed that out to Thrawn an hour ago, suggesting they at least partially close the gap. The admiral had responded with some nonsense about not spooking them and had ignored the recommendation.

Just as he'd ignored every other suggestion Niriz had made about this whole operation. Could he really be so reckless or incompetent?

Or could it be that he had some private agenda?

The glow of the Zeta shuttle's drive vanished into the alien hangar bay. "Recall the escort," Thrawn ordered. The officer acknowledged, and a moment later the three TIEs began curving away from the command ship-

And in that moment, the alien fighters abruptly struck. Abandoning their outer escort formation, they dropped in behind and around the three TIEs, lasers spitting brilliant bolts of red fire.

"Evasive!" Niriz snapped. "Helm: all ahead full. Move to intercept."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said. His voice was still calm, but it had taken on a cryogen-whip edge. "All ahead point one."

"Point one?" Niriz echoed, spinning to glare at the other. "Admiral-"

"We're supposed to be a colony ship, Captain," Thrawn said. "Colony ships are not designed for rapid acceleration."

"To blazes with that!" Niriz snarled, twisting back to look at the beleaguered TIEs. Two of them were ahead of their pursuers, slowly but steadily outdistancing them. But the third had been slower on the uptake and was lagging dangerously behind.

"Look behind you," Niriz muttered under his breath toward the other TIE pilots. Surely the other two pilots realized their comrade was in trouble. "Why don't they fire back?"

"Because I gave them orders not to," Thrawn told him coolly. "Helm, all ahead point two."

"You what? Admiral-"

"He's hit!" the sensor officer shouted. Niriz spun back to the viewport. The lagging TIE's starboard solar panel had disintegrated in a ball of savage fire, the fighter twisting madly as its pilot fought to bring it under control. He succeeded; but the effort cost him too much speed, and the rest of his inadequate lead. Even as Niriz watched helplessly, three of the pursuing fighters swarmed around him like a flight of quamilla swooping onto a crippled redjik. There was a multiple flicker of grappling lines, and then the whole group swung around in unison into a tight curve back toward Creysis's command ship.

Niriz swore under his breath, measuring the distance with his eyes. Now that they had their prize, the rest of the alien fighters had broken off their pursuit of the other two TIEs and were also heading back home.

The command ship was also turning to flee; but if Thrawn threw full power to the *Admonitor's* drive right now, they might still be able to catch the fighters and the crippled TIE before they made it inside...

"Helm, all ahead point two five," Thrawn ordered.

Niriz turned back to face the admiral, raw fury at Thrawn's indifferent bungling battling against the military etiquette instilled in him by four generations of family service to the Fleet. The etiquette won, but just barely.

"Admiral Thrawn," he said, his voice almost steady. "I understand your reluctance to reveal our true nature to these aliens. But enough is enough."

Thrawn's glowing eyes might have sparked a little brighter at the word aliens. But when he spoke, his voice was as calm as ever. "Actually, Captain, I don't think you do understand," he said. "The other two TIEs will be returning shortly; please go to the aft bridge comm station and check on their status."

"Admiral, the command ship is moving away," the sensor officer reported. "Thirty-eight fighters have joined it, all of the ships we saw earlier. They're forming into a screened-flight configuration around the command ship."

"What's their speed?"

"One-six-five."

"Helm, bring our speed to one-six-three," Thrawn instructed.

Niriz took a step closer to Thrawn. "What if they jump to lightspeed?" he growled.

"We're watching them," Thrawn assured him. "If they jump, we'll have their vector. But I don't think they will." He raised a blue-black eyebrow. "I believe you were to check on the TIE fighters."

In other words, he was dismissed. "Acknowledged, Admiral," he bit out.

Turning, he stalked down the command walkway and through the archway into the aft bridge. He turned toward the comm station -

"A word with you, Captain?"

Niriz turned. General Haverel was standing on the other side of the aft bridge, between the turbolift and the hologram pod. His face was tense with smoldering anger. "What is it, General?" Niriz asked, stepping over to him.

"I think you know as well as I do, sir," Haverel said, nodding his head sharply toward the main bridge. "I've got six troopers aboard that shuttle. Six good troopers. Did you know Thrawn insisted that they go there unarmed? No hold-out blasters; not even any knives."

"I didn't know that," Niriz said heavily. "But I can't say I'm surprised. He's trying to maintain the illusion that we're a harmless colony ship."

"Is he?" Haverel demanded. "Or this all something else entirely?"

"Such as?"

"Such as maybe he's made a private deal with this Creysis pirate," Haverel said bluntly.

Niriz felt his eyes narrow. "You must be joking."

"Am I?" Haverel countered. "Look at the facts. Thrawn agrees to send a contingent to talk to Creysis; but instead of sending it right away, he holds off for three hours. Meanwhile, he has the Zeta shuttle and one of the TIE fighters locked away in the Number Six maintenance area with about fifty techs swarming all over them."

Niriz eyed him, a cold feeling settling into his stomach. He hadn't heard anything about any work being done on the shuttle. "Which TIE was it?"

"Do you have to ask?" Haverel said darkly. "The one the aliens grabbed."

Niriz looked forward, at the admiral standing alone on the command walkway with his back to them. The man who had indeed personally arranged all this.

And who was now deliberately allowing the enemy ships to pull ahead of them. "I don't believe he'd betray us," he said, looking back at Haverel. But even to himself the words sounded hollow.

As they obviously did to Haverel, too. "What other option is there?" the general demanded scornfully. "He's given them a Zeta shuttle, a TIE fighter- both of them probably loaded to

the gills with extra technology- and is now letting them get away. And with eight of our men as prisoners, just as an extra bonus."

Niriz stared at Thrawn's back, the weight of four generations of service denying that such blatant treason was possible from a senior flag officer.

But against that was the weight of the actual evidence. "Why would he do it?"

"Who knows?" Haverel rumbled, waving a hand in curt dismissal. "He's an alien. Worse, he's an alien from right here in the Unknown Regions. Maybe he's known this Creysis for years- could be he even set this charade up in advance. That doesn't matter. What matters is what we're going to do about it."

The cold feeling in Niriz's stomach turned to sharp-edged ice. "What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

"You know what I mean, Captain," Haverel said. "I'm saying that the only chance those men out there have is for us to relieve Thrawn of command."

"Or in other words," Niriz said quietly, "you're suggesting mutiny."

A muscle in Haverel's cheek twitched. "I'm suggesting that the Empire and our oaths have been betrayed," he said. "And I'm suggesting that it's our duty to set things right."

"By sedition?"

"The crime has already been committed," Haverel insisted. "And not by us. All we'll be doing is taking the *Admonitor* back for the Empire."

Niriz looked back at Thrawn again. The weight of four generations of service... "Let's give him a little more time," he said at last. "Maybe he'll- I don't know. Come to his senses."

"It's almost too late for that," Haverel said bitterly. "It's certainly too late for the good men he sent out there to die."

Niriz took a deep breath. "We're warriors of the Imperial Fleet," he reminded Haverel, and himself. "It's our duty to die when the situation requires it."

For a moment the two men gazed at each other. "All right, Captain," Haverel said at last. "You do what you have to. So will I."

Turning, he stalked into the turbolift. He turned around as the door closed, giving Niriz a glimpse of his implacable expression, and then he was gone.

With a tired sigh, Niriz crossed to the comm station. The two TIEs had made it back safely, hangar bay control informed him, and the pilots would be available to talk to him in a few minutes. He waited until they had extricated themselves from their fighters, confirmed that neither was hurt and that neither fighter was damaged, and ordered them to report to debriefing.

He signed off, and for a few minutes more he stayed where he was, thinking about what Haverel had said and fighting a silent battle within himself. But there was really only one decision possible. Turning to the main bridge, he headed back down the command walkway.

It seemed a longer walk than usual before he reached Thrawn's side. "Captain," the admiral said, his voice its usual smoothness. "Report."

"Both TIEs have returned safely," Niriz said, gazing out at the fleeing alien ships. Even in the short time he'd been gone, they'd moved noticeably farther away. "What's the status on Creysis?"

"Unchanged," Thrawn said. "The aliens have increased their speed to one-seven-two. We're maintaining pursuit at one-six-three."

Less than a quarter of what the *Admonitor* could actually do. "Creysis is probably taking both the shuttle and the TIE fighter apart right now," he said. "I presume you know that."

"Yes."

"Possibly taking Commander Parck and his delegation apart, too."

Thrawn shook his head, an almost imperceptible movement of his head. "No, he won't have harmed them yet. Simple caution dictates that. He won't have taken them far from the shuttle, either."

Niriz frowned. He'd have thought an immediate trip to Creysis's detention center would be in order. "Why do you say that?"

"Because one or more of them could be carrying transmission cameras," Thrawn said. "Until he has a better idea of

our technology level, he won't risk letting them see more of his command ship than necessary."

"Perhaps," Niriz said. "On the other hand, between the shuttle and TIE fighter, he can presumably learn all he needs to about us and our technology."

Thrawn nodded. "Presumably."

Niriz stared at that alien face, frustration simmering within him. Here he was, trying desperately to give the admiral every last benefit of the doubt. And yet here was the admiral, admitting with unashamed candor how badly he'd handled this whole operation.

Did he *want* to be relieved of command?

"What it ultimately comes down to is a simple matter of trust," Thrawn said quietly. "Whether you trust me personally; whether you trust the officers who approved my promotion to the rank of admiral; whether you trust the Emperor and his decision to place me in command here."

Niriz grimaced. "It would have been easier if you hadn't mentioned that last one."

Thrawn turned to face him; and to Niriz's surprise the admiral smiled. A faint, enigmatic smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Never assume things are necessarily the way they seem, Captain," he said. "Particularly when dealing with the Emperor." The glowing eyes glittered. "Or with me."

Niriz dropped his eyes from that unblinking gaze. Haverel's doubts about Thrawn's loyalty flashed through his mind, along with his own questions about a private agenda. Or perhaps the problem was something more innocent but no less dangerous: that Thrawn had managed to convince himself that the *Admonitor's* mission was more than just an elaborate and wasteful form of exile.

Or perhaps the Emperor and all those approving officers really had known what they were doing.

But it almost didn't matter. With those four generations of service behind him, there still was only one decision possible.

He looked up again into Thrawn's face. "Admiral, I recommend you call a stormtrooper squad to the bridge," he said. "There could be trouble."

"Yes, I know." Thrawn glanced back over his shoulder. "I believe the trouble has already arrived."

Niriz turned. General Haverel had returned and was marching stolidly toward them, a formation of six black-clad troopers following in his wake.

Halfway down the command walkway the general waved the troopers to a halt and continued on to them alone. "Admiral Thrawn," he said without preamble. "In the name of the Empire, I ask that you relinquish command of the *Admonitor* to Captain Niriz, and that you allow these troopers to escort you to your quarters."

Niriz looked over Haverel's shoulder at the troopers. Their faces were set in the expressions of men who'd been given orders they agreed with but at the same time found highly unpleasant. Behind them, the officers and crewers in the crew pits were going about their duties, apparently oblivious to what was happening here.

"I see," Thrawn said calmly. "I trust, General, that you've thought this through."

"There are men out there," Haverel said harshly. "My men. I'm not just going to abandon them."

"Your loyalty is admirable," Thrawn said. "How would you propose we rescue them?"

"Perhaps we should try attacking," Haverel said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "An Imperial Star Destroyer is supposed to be pretty good at that."

"That's enough, General," Niriz said.

"No, let him continue," Thrawn said. "All right, general, we go to full power and attack. How long do you think it would take Creysis to kill all of them when he saw us bearing down on him? Or, alternatively, how long would it take him to compute a jump to lightspeed and leave us behind?"

Haverel's cheek twitched again. "Granted, it would be a risk," he said doggedly. "But sitting here doing nothing guarantees their deaths."

"That assumes I am in fact doing nothing," Thrawn said. "But leave that aside a moment. Do you propose to take command of the *Admonitor* with yourself and six troopers? Or have you polled all 47,000 of the crew to see where they stand?"

"They don't like what's happening any more than I do," Haverel bit out. "Enough of them would fall into line."

"Really." Thrawn shifted his gaze to Niriz. "Would you agree, Captain?"

Niriz braced himself. "No, Admiral," he said. "I don't believe my officers will go along with mutiny." He forced himself to look at Haverel. "Nor will I."

For a long moment no one spoke. "I'm sorry," Haverel said at last. "This is something I have to do." He started to raise his hand-

"Admiral!" the sensor officer called from the crew pit. "Eight of the fighters have broken out of formation, heading off on different vectors."

Niriz turned to look out the viewport. He got just a glimpse of the drive trails heading out from Creysis's fleet before the eight fighters jumped to lightspeed.

"Do we have jump vectors for all of them?" Thrawn asked.

"Yes, sir," the officer replied. "Specter Two signals primary target has gone on vector seventy-one mark five."

Niriz blinked. He hadn't been aware that Thrawn had launched any of their sensor-stealthed assault shuttles. "What are the Specters doing out there?" he asked.

"Watching for precisely this moment," Thrawn said, and there was no mistaking the grim satisfaction in his voice. "Comm officer, signal on frequency forty-six. Message: *now*."

Niriz looked at Haverel, who was looking as confused as he himself felt. "Admiral, if this is some belated attempt to show a little resolve-

"It's not belated at all, general," Thrawn cut him off. "It's exactly the proper time. I want three platoons of your troopers in the hangar bay in ten minutes. There are two squads of stormtroopers already there. They'll get them into proper position."

Haverel's cheek twitched. "Yes, sir." Turning, waving his troopers on ahead of him, he headed for the aft bridge.

"Your turn, Captain," Thrawn continued. "Order the helm to full power and stand by battle stations." His eyes glittered. "The charade is over. It's time to show them just who and what we really are."

Reflexively, Niriz came to full parade attention. "Acknowledged, Admiral." He raised his voice. "Helm: all ahead full. Sound battle alert."

They'd been sitting on the hangar bay deck for nearly twenty minutes now, ever since the outer hatchway doors had slammed shut behind the shuttle and the aliens had unceremoniously herded them out here, and Parck's legs were starting to feel the strain. Slowly, carefully, he eased them into a different position-

The barrel of a heavy handgun slapped warningly against the side of his head. "You not move," the alien wheezed.

One of the troopers sitting across from Parck stirred, his face darkening as he looked up at the guard. "Patience," Parck murmured, just in case the other was thinking of trying something foolish or desperate. The time for action, Thrawn had told him, would come only after Creysis's people had had time to examine the shuttle and the damaged TIE fighter they'd brought aboard.

From the look of things, that time must be getting close. The shuttle itself had been only cursorily looked at, but the TIE had been practically disassembled. The pilot, Lieutenant Klar, had been over there with the aliens most of the time, a pair of weapons jammed into his ribs as they kept up their running interrogation. From where he sat, Parck couldn't hear either the questions or Klar's answers; he could only hope Thrawn had coached the pilot on what he was or was not to tell them.

Across the way, a door irised open and Creysis stepped into the hangar bay. Parck eyed him as he lumbered toward the group of prisoners, but the alien expression was impossible to read.

The effort turned out to be unnecessary. "Parck," he wheezed, those repulsive mouth tentacles wiggling more than usual. "So you were telling truth. Foolish for you."

"What do you mean?" Parck asked.

"Your spacecraft is indeed a *po'dorj*, ripe for harvest," Creysis said, pointing with his elbow in the direction of the outer hatchway. "Slow and feeble and full of good things. Soon it will be in the grip of the Ebruchu. "

"Ah," Parck nodded. "So that's what you call yourselves, is it? The Ebruchi? We'd wondered about that."

The mouth tentacles momentarily stopped their movement. "Do you not hear me, Parck? " he demanded. "I say we will take your spacecraft and all you possess. "

"With what? " Parck snorted. "The ships you have here? Don't be ridiculous. "

"All the Ebruchi will soon be here, " Creysis snarled, or as close as the alien voice could probably get to a snarl with that chronic wheezing. "Even now messengers have flown to summon them to the kill. "

Parck nodded, a warm glow of satisfaction filling him. Satisfaction, and the usual admiration for his commander. Once again, as he had so many times before, Thrawn had anticipated his opponent's moves down to the letter." And what makes you think the *Admonitor* will still be here when they arrive?" he asked.

"Because even now it continues to chase us, " Creysis said. "Foolishly, for it is too slow to catch us. They think to rescue you from the Ebruchi victory feast. Instead, they will lose all."

Parck swallowed. An Ebruchi victory feast. Did that mean what he was afraid it meant? "What sort of feast? "

The gloating alien never got a chance to tell him. From across the room, one of the other Ebruchi suddenly shouted.

Creysis turned and bounded over to him, moving at surprising speed for a creature of his bulk.

"What's going on?" one of the troopers muttered.

"The admiral must have made his move," Parck murmured back, watching the guards out of the corner of his eye. At the moment their attention was on the animated conversation going on across the hangar bay, but that wasn't going to last much longer. "At a guess, I'd say they suddenly found out just how fast the *Admonitor* can really travel."

The trooper glanced up at the guards. "So what are we supposed to do?"

Parck smiled. "Just get ready to duck."

And with a highly gratifying punctuality, the side of the Zeta shuttle directly over the starboard fuel tank blew off.

And into the alien hangar bay swarmed a dozen stormtroopers. The first synchronized blaze of blaster fire took out the guards standing over the seated troopers.

"Klar! " Parck shouted, pointing across the room to where the TIE pilot stood beside his disassembled fighter. But Klar had already hit the deck, and the stormtroopers' second volley cleared away the aliens standing dumb-founded over him.

"Commander Parck?" one of the stormtroopers called.

"We're all here," Parck confirmed, jumping to his feet and nearly falling back down again as fatigued leg muscles tried to cramp up on him. "That doorway's the only exit from the hangar bay."

"Right," the stormtrooper said. Six of his men were already moving to take up defense positions at the door, while two others were busily setting explosives to blow the outer hatchway. "Get your men aboard the shuttle."

"You heard him, troopers," Parck called. "Get moving."

"They're coming around, Admiral," Niriz called, peering out the viewport. "All thirty of their remaining fighters. Definitely an attack formation."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Thrawn said, coming back forward down the command walkway from his brief private conversation with the comm officer in his crew pit. "Launch one squadron of TIE fighters to intercept."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said, gesturing confirmation of the order to the fighter control officer. "Do you think one squadron will be enough?"

"More than enough," Thrawn assured him. "With those kind of numbers, it's more important for our pilots to be able to keep out of each other's way."

"Even with the aliens fully aware of TIE fighter capabilities?"

Thrawn smiled. "They're not aware of TIE fighter capabilities, Captain. They're aware of Lieutenant Klar's TIE fighter's capabilities. There's a considerable difference."

"Ah," Niriz said, understanding at last. So that was what that mysterious three-hour delay had been about. Rather than loading extra technology aboard Lieutenant Klar's TIE as

part of a secret deal with Creysis, as Haverel had feared, Thrawn had instead been removing the critical parts of what was already there.

The TIE formation was nearly to the cloud of incoming enemy fighters, outnumbered three to one by ships four times their size. Unconsciously, Niriz held his breath.

And then the two forces collided, and the TIEs cut through the leading edge of the enemy shock force like a drive exhaust through spun snow. Eleven of the twelve targeted alien fighters were turned to instant fireballs by the Imperials' first salvo, the twelfth lasting just long enough to crab sideways into one of his comrades with a violent crash that took out both ships. The alien attack faltered, their arrogant confidence breaking visibly into sudden confusion. Taking advantage of the hesitation, the TIEs doubled back with review-stand precision, carving an equally devastating slash through the rear of the enemy formation.

"Excellent," Thrawn said approvingly. "My compliments, Captain- your work with the pilots these past few days has been well worthwhile."

"Admiral, we have a Zeta shuttle registering now," the sensor officer called. "Bearing away from command ship."

"Have the TIE fighters clear an escape path for them," Thrawn ordered. "All turbolaser batteries, engage enemy fighters at will, but leave the command ship untouched. Helm, prepare to jump to lightspeed; target is the first system along course vector seventy-one mark five. Tractor stations, lock on enemy command ship. I want it taken intact."

The sky outside the viewport began to light up with the blaze of the *Admonitor's* heavy turbolasers, and the already one-sided battle collapsed completely into a rout. Creysis's command ship was trying desperately to escape, zigzagging like a wounded fish as its fighter screen literally disintegrated around and behind it. But it didn't have anywhere near the *Admonitor's* speed, and within seconds the Star Destroyer had closed to capture range.

"Activate tractor beams," Thrawn instructed.

"Activated," the tractor officer reported, gazing at the display over his subordinates' shoulders. "Connection... is good. We have them, sir."

"Reel it in, lieutenant," Thrawn ordered. "Order the troopers in the hangar bay to stand by for boarding. All TIE fighters are to break off and return."

Three tense minutes later, it was done. "Hangar bay reports positive docking lock on the ship, Admiral," the comm officer said. "Stormtroopers have burned through in three places; boarding has begun. All TIE fighters have returned with no casualties."

"Helm?"

"Jump calculated and laid in, sir," the officer replied. "Estimated time to target system is two point five minutes."

"Acknowledged," Thrawn said. "Helm: jump to light-speed. Fighter control-"

There was the distant rising hum of the hyperdrive, and the stars outside did their familiar surrealistic explosion into starlines. "Fighter control, confirm all TIE wings are ready to launch," Thrawn continued. "Turbolaser crews, double-check battle readiness."

Niriz nodded toward the mottled sky of hyperspace outside. "What are you expecting to find out there?"

"Whoever Creysis answers to, of course," Thrawn said. "Despite his earlier bluster, he's not the ruler of anything. Far less the lord of all he surveys."

Niriz frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Very much so," Thrawn assured him. "A genuine commander would never accept an invitation to board an unknown and possibly dangerous ship. Nor would he stay in the vicinity so long after imprisoning our vehicles and men, running from us instead of jumping to lightspeed. He was deliberately presenting himself as a target, hoping to force us to reveal the *Admonitor's* full capabilities."

"Which you of course were clever enough not to give him," Niriz said, grimacing with embarrassment at how badly he'd misread the entire situation.

"Yes," Thrawn said. A simple fact, with no undertone of pride or reproof in his voice. "Creysis is a subordinate. But he's an ambitious subordinate, willing to risk his own life and those of his troops in order to gather as much information as possible before calling the rest of the pack in for the kill."

"All right," Niriz said, forehead wrinkling with concentration. "I understand that. I also understand that it makes sense tactically for us to take the battle directly to their headquarters instead of waiting for them to gather their entire force against us. But Creysis sent out eight fighters, on eight different vectors. How do you know this is the way to their headquarters?"

"It comes down to information again, Captain," Thrawn said, his tone that of an Academy instructor trying to elicit the correct response from a student. "We've established that Creysis is the sort to send all the information his commander will want or need. Not only that he's found a weak and promising target..." He lifted one eyebrow.

And suddenly Niriz got it. "Not only that he's found a promising target," he said, "but hard evidence of just how promising that target is. That sculpture you gave him had a transponder built into it, didn't it?"

"Very good, Captain," Thrawn said, and there was indeed a note of approval in his tone. "Helm?"

"Ninety seconds, Admiral," the officer said.

"Have all stations report in," Thrawn ordered. "Whoever we find here will be in the process of mobilizing to go to Creysis's aid. When we come out of hyperspace, we'll come out fighting."

Ninety seconds later, they did.

The door to his quarters slid open, and Niriz looked up, expecting to see Admiral Thrawn step inside.

It was, instead, Commander Parck. "Do you have a moment, Captain?" he asked.

"I'm likely to have a great many moments," Niriz said, suppressing a sigh as he waved the other inside. "Is that what you've come to tell me?"

"Not exactly," Parck said. "Actually, I'm here to tell you that the admiral's turned you down. May I sit down?"

Niriz frowned. "What do you mean, he's turned me down?"

"Exactly that," Parck said, pulling over a chair and sitting down. "He's not accepting your resignation as captain of the *Admonitor*."

"That's ridiculous," Niriz growled, not sure whether to be relieved or outraged. "I discussed mutiny with another senior officer- that's a court-martial offense. If he's not going to send me back to Coruscant with Haverel, he has to at the very least demote me."

"As you may have noticed, Thrawn doesn't always consider himself bound by the manual," Parck said dryly. "Besides, all you did was talk about it. When the crunch came, you made the command decision to side with him. That's what counts."

"Is it?" Niriz demanded. "Fine- so I sided with him this once. What about the next time he pulls one of these stunts? How does he know he'll be able to trust me then?"

Parck favored him with an odd look. "You've got it backwards, Captain. You're an honorable officer, from a proud Core World family. There's never been any question in Thrawn's mind that he can trust you."

"You could have fooled me," Niriz growled, thinking back to his conversation with Thrawn on the bridge. "If he trusts me so much, why didn't he let me in on what he was doing?"

"Oh, you were proving you were trustworthy, all right," Parck assured him. "But you weren't proving it to Thrawn. You were proving it to yourself."

He turned to gaze in the direction of the *Admonitor's* bow. "There are tremendous things out there waiting to be discovered, Captain. New species, rich worlds ripe for the taking, and any number of potential threats to the Empire. Our job is to find those threats, identify them... and eliminate them."

He looked back at Niriz. "And that's why we're here. Because Thrawn is the best."

Niriz eyed him. "So you're saying this whole thing really wasn't just the fallout from a political battle."

Parck snorted. "Hardly. I'm sure Thrawn's enemies thought so, but as usual they were at least three steps behind him and the Emperor. No, Thrawn's been wanting to bring the Imperial presence to the Unknown Regions for a long time. His enemies merely provided a convenient excuse for the Emperor to send him here without anyone knowing the real reason behind it. Eventually, depending on how quickly the

Emperor can put down all these brush-fire revolts, we'll be getting more ships and men to assist us. Planting bases and garrisons; maybe even a few full-range colonies."

He smiled dreamily, his eyes taking on a distant look. "The Empire is on the move, Captain. And we're the ones who are taking it there."

For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Then, hunching his shoulders briefly as if shaking himself out of a pleasant daydream, Parck stood up. "I suppose we'd best get back to the bridge," he said. "The interrogations of the surviving pirates should be finished soon, and we'll want to be available when the admiral's ready to discuss where we go next."

"Yes," Niriz agreed, getting to his feet with an inner enthusiasm he hadn't felt in years. Yes, his career undoubtedly lay in official ruins back on Coruscant. But that was all right. What faced him now was likely to be considerably more interesting. "After you, Commander."

HOUR OF JUDGMENT

CHAPTER ONE **TRALUS**

From a distance, it was a beautiful sight. The verdant planet, green and blue sometimes occluded by soft white cloud-drifts, continued to spin peacefully on its axis, as though purposefully ignoring the fireshow overhead. High above those clouds, explosions burst constantly against the black backdrop of space. Most were brief, tiny flashes, but others were bright pyres that never seemed to burn out. In between the explosions was the constant strobing laser blasts, red and green and blue all coming together to create a constant riot of color over Tralus.

The contrast was really what made it beautiful. From the distance, you could see them both: the aloof living world, and the colossal battle in orbit, where thousands were dying every minute.

The conflagration over Tralus was the largest pitched battle since Endor fifteen months back. Nearly a hundred capital ships on either side- star destroyers, strike cruisers, carriers, frigates- were throwing themselves at one another without mercy.

Grand Admiral Octavian Grant hadn't been at Endor, and hadn't seen the titanic battle there, but like every soldier of the Empire he could rattle off the litany of everything they'd lost that awful day: the Emperor, Darth Vader, the Death Star and the *Executor*, Grand Admirals Teshik and Declaan, Admirals Strage and Piett, on and on.

He had no doubt that Endor was the single worst disaster the strike the Empire. He also had no doubt that the Battle of Tralus was the worst thing he'd personally seen after a

quarter-century in the Empire's service. In some ways it was even more humiliating. At Endor they'd been laid low by Rebel tricks; here, at Tralus, Imperial slaughtered Imperial by the thousands. They had no one to blame but themselves.

Grant watched from the bridge of his star destroyer *Oriflamme*, safe and distant adjacent to the massive Center-point Station around which Tralus and its twin world, Talus, orbited. He tried, very hard, to focus on how beautiful the battle looked from afar, because it was the only way to keep from feeling sick to his stomach. Somehow, he'd never believed things could get *this* bad, even though he knew, in his heart, that he should have seen it coming.

The Empire had begun to crumble the day Palpatine died. For twenty-five years it had staffed its upper echelons with the most ruthless, power-hungry generals and admirals and moffs, all loyal to nothing but their own ambition. Grant knew that better than anyone; he was one of them and had been for as long as there'd been an Empire. Without Palpatine to hold them together they were falling on themselves like rabid gundarks. Even now, his fellow Grand Admirals Pitta and Grunger, the famous white-uniformed elite of the Imperial Navy, were desperately trying to murder each other over Tralus.

And Grant was standing back, at a very safe and pretty distance, letting it happen.

A throat cleared behind him, timidly. Grant turned around to see *Oriflamme*'s captain standing over his shoulder, staring at him, a question in his eyes but unwilling to speak. Captain Bremel had been jumped up to his position after Endor, when *Oriflamme*'s old captain was in turn jumped up to admiral in a desperate attempt to fill the hole left by senior officers dying, deserting, or, worst of all, switching sides. When Grant had been Bremel's age there'd been no Empire; the Old Republic hadn't even had a formal navy.

"Grand Admiral," Bremel finally managed to say, "Are we going to hold position here?"

It was a question that had to be on the mind of the entire crew. Acting on orders from Coruscant, that bright capital of a crumbling empire, Grant had brought the biggest force he could muster, on orders to stop Grunger and Pitta from

fighting and force them to submit to the orders of regent Ysanne Isard. Unfortunately, the biggest force he could get was still half the size of either Grunger or Pitta's fleets.

"We will hold for now," Grant told Bremel. "I want to see how much stomach they have for a real slugfest."

Bremel's eyes darted to the lightshow far beyond the bridge. "They've been going at it for five hours, sir. No signs of slowing down."

"I realize that."

"Sir... Would it be wise to at least announce our presence with a broadcast? We *are* trying to get them to stand down, aren't we?"

Doing that would open the possibility of Grunger and Pitta turning around and both charging at him, though more likely the two grand admirals would keep straining for each other's throats. Grant shook his head. "I want to give them more time to tire down. As you may have noticed, Captain, our fleet is underpowered."

"I know, sir. I was thinking, ah..."

"Ah what? Don't trail off, Captain. Speak your mind."

"Well, sir... There's a lot of good Imperials dying out there, sir. It seems terrible just to... stand back and watch."

"And you thought I wasn't aware of that? You think I don't feel as disgusted as you by all of this?"

Bremel's blue eyes blinked. "Ah, no sir! I was just saying, I, ah, well, it doesn't feel right."

"Nothing's been since Endor," Grant said, "Frankly, our best hope is for Grunger and Pitta to annihilate each other. Then we ride in and mop up the mess."

Bremel swallowed. "Do you think that... likely, sir? I mean, knowing them like you do?"

Grant turned back and looked out the viewport. They'd been grand admirals, all three of them, appointed to their rank by the Emperor two years before Yavin and given them their lovely snow-white uniforms and gold-braided epaulets. Grant had felt honored by it at the time, even as he'd known some of his were less deserving of that honor.

Danetta Pitta had gotten his gold birds less because of his skill and more for his fanatic anti-alien beliefs, themselves an attempt to compensate for his mixed heritage. He'd set

himself up as a military overlord of the Corellian System's five worlds, probably with the intent of exterminating all those sub-humans on Drall and Selonia.

As for Josef Grunger, he'd proven himself since the Clone Wars, and now that Palpatine was gone his ambition had gotten the best of him. He'd assembled dozens of star destroyers and captains loyal to him with the intent of plowing through Pitta and seizing the Corellian system as a stepping-stone for an assault on Imperial Center.

And Octavian Grant, who'd stayed loyal to Isard mostly because he wasn't sure where else to run, was charged with stopping them.

Finally, so softly Bremel could barely hear, Grant said, "Likely, Captain? I'm rather expecting it."

A barrage of concussion missiles lanced out at the two *Victory*-class star destroyers hovering over *Aggressor's* starboard flank. Fire blossomed on their shields but didn't die, not as *Aggressor* let loose volley after volley from dozens of turrets spanned along the aft portion of its nineteen-kilometer hull. Pitta's two destroyers, pathetically tiny compared to Grunger's flagship, lasted less than five minutes before their shields collapsed and missiles tore apart their hulls, spilling flame and wreckage and thousands of bodies into space.

Josef Grunger felt no satisfaction at the sight. When Pitta sent those two destroyers to attack *Aggressor's* bridge, he surely knew he was sending those men to their deaths. Like Grunger himself, Pitta was more than willing to throw away his men's lives as long as there was a halfway decent reason for it. Grunger, hands clasped behind his back, stalked over to the tactical section and scanned the display holo. Sure enough, Pitta was sending another destroyer, *Imperial*-class, plus two *Loronar* strike cruisers to attack *Aggressor's* aft.

"Recall the second fighter wing," Grunger barked to the tactical lieutenant. "Have the bombers make their runs. Tell *Reprisal* and *Anaxes Dawn* to help them."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Walen and Trigit to head for Pitta's forward line. Engage but do not press through until we arrive."

"We're moving forward with the attack sir?"

“It’s time to stop playing around.” Grunger snarled. “We have the superior force. We’re going to break through and crack open Pitta’s command station like an egg.”

“Yes, Grand Admiral.”

It always felt good, hearing his title. He had more a right to it than that mongrel Pitta. When Palpatine had put those gold epaulets on his shoulders he’d felt like destiny was laying its hand on him, and he’d known, deep down, that it would be his fate to rule once Palpatine was gone.

Grunger turned away from the tactical station so he could see the battle again with his own eyes. Far ahead of *Aggressor’s* bow, a line of blue ion engines glowed bright as some twenty destroyers pushed toward Pitta’s main force in Tralus’ mid orbit. Against the blue-green glow of the planet, Grunger could make out the spherical form of Pitta’s torpedo sphere. Often likened to a miniature Death Star, a torpedo sphere was primarily a seige weapon; its many torpedo and missile batteries were mainly designed to fire into a planet’s gravity well at stationary surface targets, or to bust open planetary shields. It was not designed to combat a fleet in space, especially not one the size of Grunger’s.

That Pitta would pick one of those to base his command from just showed how out of his depth the Etti half-breed was. *Aggressor*, the second ship of its class to roll off the yards after Vader’s own *Executor*, could dispose of it in minutes.

Reports came in from the crew pits; the bomber squads were beginning their runs on the attacking ships. One strike cruiser crippled. The enemy destroyer was firing but *Aggressor’s* aft shields absorbed it all; the deck didn’t even shudder.

Pitta’s torpedo sphere slowly started to grow up ahead. Grunger stalked over to the tactical station and looked over the holo again; Walen and Trigit were holding positions, ready to charge Pitta’s forward destroyers on his order. He was shocked to see how thin Pitta’s line was; it was almost like he was spreading his ships thin, so as to defend multiple sectors, even though Grunger had clearly concentrated his forces for a single thrust.

Pitta was a fool, but it was hard to believe he was *that* stupid. Grunger glared at the tactical lieutenant. "Are there any other ships in this system I should be aware of?"

"Sir, we've noticed another fleet hanging in the sensor shadow of Centerpoint station." The lieutenant jabbed a finger at the ancient space station's blue holo-marker on the edge of the battle zone.

Grunger frowned. "Imperial?"

"Yes, sir. We could about two dozen ships, mixed classes. They haven't moved."

A fleet sent by Isard, probably, to stop his plunge into the Core. Pathetic; Grunger had more than twice as many ships, even after the attrition of the past few hours. Isard was a schemer, a spy, a flimsy spineless *woman*. She had no idea how to fight a proper war. It was why she didn't deserve to be holding Coruscant. Once he was finished with Pitta, Grunger looked forward to showing Isard her place.

Still, it had apparently set Pitta on edge, which was good enough. Grunger said, "Ignore them. Order Walen and Trigit to put their forward shields on maximum. Tell all forward batteries to prepare to fire."

"Yes, sir!"

Grunger allowed a smile to come to his face and he looked back out the viewport at the glow of all those engines, and the dark sphere of Pitta's command station, just ready to be broken.

He felt like he'd been waiting his whole life for this.

"Closer, closer..." Grand Admiral Pitta's hands balled to fists at his side as he watched the tactical holo. Anticipation was building inside him, desperate for release.

Everything had gone to plan so far; Grunger, arrogant as always, had brought his whole fleet into the Corellian sector. Pitta's force was smaller, but it didn't matter. After sending enough ships to harass Grunger's flagship, the other grand admiral was finally ready to face Pitta head-to-head. With that precious *Aggressor* of his, he probably thought he was invincible. Pitta looked forward to teaching him his lesson.

Pitta stalked across the command deck to the gunnery station. The torpedo sphere's weapons chief was pacing up

and down behind the backs of his seated crew; he looked just as anxious as Pitta. The grand admiral allowed himself a smile and said, "When will *Aggressor* be in range?"

"At her rate of approach, ninety seconds," the chief returned his grin.

Pitta looked out the forward viewport. The space ahead was starting to light up with explosions as Grunger's forward line of star destroyers engaged Pitta's own. The captains Pitta had sent to the front had to have been wondering why they weren't better reinforced; a few had even dared complain to Pitta personally. But in the end, they'd held their faith in his white uniform and retained their positions. Now their ships were being torn to shreds by Grunger's fast-advancing fleet. They could never know it, but at least those crews were making a worthy sacrifice.

"Sir," the chief said, "*Aggressor* is in range now."

"Excellent." Pitta deep a deep breath and savored the anticipation, the moment. With every passing second, Grunger's flagship was being drawn deeper into a trap and the pompous fool didn't even know it.

Before giving the order, Pitta asked, "Are we still receiving telemetry?"

"Yes, sir. Still streaming."

"And the stream is being piped directly into our targeting computers?"

"Guns are ready, sir."

Pitta gave a tight, satisfied smile and allowed himself to think of all the times Grunger has slighted him, looked down on him as a fool and a fanatic and a subhuman mongrel.

Pitta stabbed a finger at Grunger's looming flagship and said, "All guns, *fire!*"

It hung in space far outside Tralus' orbit, unnoticed by any of the three Imperial fleets. Its engines were dead, and only sporadic, tiny bursts from its directional repulsors kept it from drifting too far from the battle zone. Nearly invisible, the T-65r Recon X-wing floated in the vacuum with all sensor buoys extended and a single tight-beam transmission constantly feeding all gathered data out of the system to another relay satellite on the edge of the sector, which in turn

transmitted to New Republic's mobile military headquarters on *Home One*.

Back on the flagship all this data was decrypted and converted near-instantaneously into a tactical hologram just as detailed and comprehensive as those used by Pitta and Grunger themselves. The assembled military, intelligence, and political officials didn't get to actually *see* Pitta's counter-attack with their eyes, but even on the tactical holo-display that hung over the center of their round table, it took everyone's breaths away.

Pitta's torpedo sphere opened all its cannons at once, firing into space. Its warheads, normally designed to strike ground-based targets and constructed for long distances and atmospheric resistance, shot through the vacuum toward Grunger's fleet. Many cut straight for Grunger's advanced line and impacted on those ships' forward shields. Many more arced high, then dropped suddenly and slammed down on the aft and dorsal sections of the destroyers. One barrage of over fifty torpedoes slipped past *Aggressor's* forward shield wall and impacted on the super star destroyer's unprotected mid-section, rupturing the giant's hull and crippling its main hangar bay.

Such an attack was normally impossible; a torpedo sphere simply didn't have the sensors or targeting computers to calculate such a complex attack. Pitta, however, had been lucky; an agent on *Aggressor* was feeding telemetry data and ship status updates for Grunger's entire fleet directly to his torpedo sphere's targeting computers. Every missile knew exactly how high to fly, and the most vulnerable place on every destroyer on which to drop.

Pitta knew it all because that agent on *Aggressor* was working for New Republic fleet intelligence.

When the barrage hit, the tension that had been holding the room in silence broke. Cheer and claps erupted. By the time Admiral Ackbar succeeded in quieting everyone down, a second torpedo barrage was tearing up Grunger's attack force even more.

They watched the rest of the fight in silence again, but the mood had definitely changed. There was still the held breathing, the eyes glued to the holo, the palpable tension,

but it was different. Wedge Antilles felt it as much as anyone. They were no longer watching to see if their gamble would work; they were watching to see *how well*.

Wedge still didn't know who had come up with the idea. Military intel already knew that Grunger was going to plow his way through Corellia on his way to Coruscant; whether they'd inserted a spy onto Grunger's flagship or had recruited someone was beyond Wedge's grade. He was just a fighter jock, and felt mildly surprised to be included at this meeting. In the light of the tactical holo he could make out so many august faces, all tense and attentive: Mon Mothma herself, Leia Organa and Borsk Fey'lya from the Provisional Council, Ackbar and Burke from fleet command, Airen Cracken from NRI, Hiram Drayson from military intelligence, plus a dozen more senior officers and staffers. And, of course, the leader of Rogue Squadron, who'd apparently earned a place among them.

They watched the tactical holo as the battle went on. Pitta's torpedo sphere unleashed a third volley, taking out four more destroyers on Grunger's front line. The mammoth *Aggressor* itself wasn't turning back; on the contrary, despite taking heavy damage it held position, firing on the torpedo sphere even as Pitta called in more destroyers to attack *Aggressor's* flank. All the while that third Imperial fleet was just sitting at Centerpoint, like it was waiting for who-knew-what. The T-65r was too far away to get any identification scan on that fleet, but Wedge bet it was some of Isard's forces.

It still amazed him how brutally the Empire was tearing itself apart. After overthrowing Palpatine's initial successor, Sate Pestage, Ysanne Isard was acting like a self-appointed empress on Coruscant, though Grunger was intent on storming the Core and usurping her throne. Zsinj, Teradoc, and Kaine claimed huge swathes of the Outer Rim while others, like Krennel, Delvardus, Harrsk, Brill, and Drommel secured smaller fiefdoms.

For the New Republic, buoyed but not overconfident after Endor, the real trick had been deciding which of their many fractured enemies deserved the most attention. Most agreed that Isard and Coruscant were the main prize, but if the

Imperial factions wanted to savage each other, they weren't above helping the slaughter along.

As he watched the display, Wedge felt torn. Every star destroyer that winked off the tactical holo meant one less blast that might one day kill him or his pilots. At the same time, it meant thousands of men dead, most of them confused pawns of one power-mad warlord or another. What was happening over Tralus was a tragedy; it was also the biggest victory for the New Republic in months, and they weren't even on the battlefield.

He heard a collective intake of breath, and his attention was pulled from his conscience and back to the holo. Even amidst the swarm of flashing lights marking all those battling ships, it was clear the *Aggressor*, Grand Admiral Grunger's colossal flagship, was on the move. It was charging forward at what looked like maximum speed, and Pitta's torpedo sphere was dead ahead.

"What the devil is he *doing*?" Pitta snarled. *Aggressor* was still a far distance away, but the super star destroyer's flat black-and-grey wedge was looming to fill the viewport. Pitta spun on his crew chief and barked, "Sitrep! Now!"

The chief's grin was long since gone. His jaw worked soundlessly for a second before he said, "Sir, he's... He's charging. He's stopped his guns and put all power to forward shields!"

"Tell all ships to concentrate fire on *Aggressor*! And our guns! Are the guns reprimed?"

The chief swallowed. "Sir, we fired off *four* full time-on-target barrages with all canons. Our systems are still straining to cool down the guns."

Pitta stabbed a finger at *Aggressor*. "I don't care! Fire everything! We have to stop him!"

Outside the viewport, the star destroyer began smashing through the tattered remains of Pitta's forward line. Destroyers had encircled Grunger's giant on its aft and flanks but *Aggressor* seemed determined to leave them all behind now.

Pitta watched in awe and dread as one of his frigates, stuck in front of the charging destroyer like a flit-gnat before a

landspeeder, burst into flames as it struck *Aggressor's* forward shields.

"Where are those guns?" Pitta snapped.

"Firing solution is... ready sir."

"Do it! Do it now!"

Suddenly the entire torpedo sphere shuddered. He could see the thrust-trails of hundreds of torpedoes as they arced over *Aggressor* before dropping down, creating a field of fiery geysers on the star destroyer's black superstructure.

And still, Grunger kept charging.

"Fire again!" Pitta shouted.

"We can't, sir! The chief said. "We're getting weapon malfunctions all over the board. Reports say batteries A12 through B8 just *exploded* from overheating, we're getting hull breaches, and-"

The entire command deck rock. Pitta grabbed hold of the nearest console to keep from tipping over. Grunger kept coming, his shields up, his guns dead.

Realization dawn on the chief's face. He said, "Sir, he's going to ram!"

"He wants to take everything from me," Pitta snarled. He raised his voice to a shout. "I won't let him do this! Josef you bastard! I won't let you do this! *I won't let you win!*"

As his beautiful, broken flagship plunged toward Pitta's torpedo sphere, Grand Admiral Josef Grunger still couldn't believe he'd been outfought by a miserable Etti half-breed.

It would have been better if it was someone else, another grand admiral. Makati, maybe, or even Grant. He would have been all right with Teshik or Syn, he'd always respected them, but they were both dead. But *Pitta*, a pathetic mongrel promoted only for his racial fanaticism, itself just a sad attempt to hide his disgusting subhuman heritage...

It was disgusting how far the Empire had fallen, and how fast. In a way, Grunger was glad he wouldn't have to watch whatever humiliations came next.

The grand admiral stepped over the body of his former helm chief and casually dropped his sidearm next to the man's smoking head. The rest of the crew, scared into obedience, wouldn't dare deny him now, even as he

commanded them to their deaths. The thought, briefly, occurred to him that he could order an evacuation so most of the crew could be saved, but there was no point in that. There was no point in any of it. They'd be nothing without him anyway.

He walked up to the viewport. The peaceful face of Tralus, white clouds over green continents, had filled the entire space, blocking out the stars. Pitta's torpedo sphere sat silhouetted against the backdrop like a black hole. Explosions were breaking out on its surface but he didn't see any escape pods or evacuation shuttles.

He smiled a bitter smile. He and Pitta, well, maybe they hadn't been so different after all.

Just a day ago he'd been so confident of victory he'd been able to imagine in his head, in perfect detail, his triumphal march on Imperial Center. He'd been able to picture the adoration on the faces of the capital's citizens, and the shocked, shamed look on Isard's as he hauled the pathetic woman off to be executed.

Well, her time would come. It was coming for all of them, one way or another.

Grand Admiral Grunger straightened his white uniform, clasped his hands behind his back, and watched as *Aggressor's* bow stabbed into the heart of Pitta's torpedo sphere. Flame burst from the point of impact and rushed to meet him.

The bridge of the *Oriflamme* fell into awful, mournful silence. Even from this far distance they could see clearly, with the naked eye, as *Aggressor* collided with the torpedo sphere. The resulting explosion flared bright and seemed to flare forever, even though in truth it lasted less than a minute before dwindling out.

Grand Admiral Grant cleared his throat and said, "Captain Bremel, take us in and prepare an open channel from my personal link."

The young captain nodded dumbly and, with visible effort, tore his eyes off the viewport. He relayed quick orders to the helm, comm, and tactical stations. Grant, standing at the fore of the bridge for all the crew to see, carefully plucked the

commmlink from his breast pocket. His hand was shaking. He tried to steady it but could not. He'd been hoping, even expecting, for Grunger and Pitta to destroy each other, but he'd never thought he would witness *that*.

The deck shuddered slightly as *Oriflamme* kicked its engines to full power. The rest of the fleet would fall in behind. All crew were on red alert, but Grant didn't think it would be necessary. Already, the laserfire between the surviving ships was dying down.

In a calm and level voice, he asked, "Captain, are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. The line is open."

Grant brought the commmlink to his lips and said, "All vessels, this is Grant Admiral Octavian Grant. As you can see, Grand Admirals Pitta and Grunger are dead. We stand ready to offer medical and technical assistance to all ships in need. We also stand ready to fight. I have been authorized by the true regent of the Galactic Empire, Ysanne Isard, to grant a general amnesty to all captains and crew willing to forswear their allegiance to either of the late Grand Admirals and acknowledge her command.

"My fleet will be within firing range of your vessels in approximately ten minutes. Our comm lines will be open and willing to accept any surrenders until then. Any vessels that have *not* recognized the Empire's rightful rulership in ten minutes will be fired upon.

"I look forward to hearing your replies."

Grant switched off the commmlink and placed it back in his breast pocket. He took a deep breath, in and out, then turned to Captain Bremel.

He raised one eyebrow in a wordless question. The captain, standing over the comm station, leaned in close to his lieutenants. Grant waited patiently, back to Tralus and the approaching fleet, until Bremel said, "Fifteen ships have contacted us so far. All offer surrender and seven request assistance."

Pretty good for the first minute, Grant thought.

"Then we'll give it to them," he said. "After all, they are soldier of the Empire and they need our help, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Bremel nodded. He looked relieved.

Grant turned back to the viewport and watched the approaching planet, the broken ships, the scattered fleets. They were all soldiers of the Empire again; it felt good for a moment. Then he wondered how long it would really last.

CHAPTER TWO

HOME ONE

As they sat side-by-side in the briefing room aboard the New Republic's mobile military headquarters, waiting for the admirals to begin, Wedge Antilles had a hard time thinking of the man next to him as his brother-in-law.

For years, Baron Soontir Fel had been a name and a spike of dread. Then, after his capture at Brentaal six months ago, he'd suddenly become more than that: an Imperial defector, a Rogue Squadron ace, and, incredibly, family.

The first part he could accept, more or less, even though Fel still insisted on wearing his old flight suit during combat missions: black with red Corellian bloodstripes down the sides. He'd swapped the Imperial shoulder-crest for a New Republic one, but the overtones were still there. As for the second part, well, no one would doubt Fel's combat record. He flew an X-wing as bravely and lethally as he'd ever flown a TIE.

The third part was the hard one. Wedge didn't know when he'd get to accept that; maybe when Syal was safe and among them. Maybe when he'd finally seen his sister again after almost twenty years.

Wedge and Fel weren't kept waiting long. Three figures stepped through a back door and onto the semicircular platform that lay at the bottom of the small arena. Wedge recognized them instantly; they'd all been there, two day ago, to witness from afar the battle at Tralus. At the center stood Supreme Commander Ackbar in his white Mon Calamari admiral's uniform. At his shoulders were two humans: the

stout gray-haired Airen Cracken and lean black-haired Hiram Drayson. Cracken was the head of New Republic Intelligence operations. Drayson was in command of the Second Fleet, though Wedge knew he also handled naval intelligence. Given that these particular officers had called only Wedge and Fel to this meeting, he allowed himself the dim hope this was about his sister.

Ackbar dismissed that assumption quickly. At a wave of his webbed hand, a series of holo-images appeared over their heads. Wedge instantly recognized bust-shots of Grand Admirals Grunger and Pitta; the same ones had been shown for the pre-battle briefing two days ago.

Ackbar turned his bulbous eyes to Fel and said, "As you've no doubt heard, two of the Empire's grand admirals were recently killed at Tralus."

Fel simply nodded. He was a bigger man than Wedge, with a stern face framed by black hair and trimmed beard. He smiled rarely; his moods, best Wedge could tell, seemed to vacillate between stern and morose.

Ackbar waved a flipper again, and another face joined the two. This one was slightly older than the others, past human middle age. Gray hair framed a pale face with narrow eyes.

"Grand Admiral Grant was also present at Tralus," he said. "From what our reconnaissance flight could gather, the surviving ships- over two dozen destroyers, pledged allegiance to Grant and Ysanne Isard."

Wedge glanced sidelong at Fel. Isard's ruthless rise to power had been one of the main reasons Fel had left the Empire. At the same time, he and Wedge both knew that the intelligence director was using all her resources to track down Syal Antilles Fel.

"Most of these ships are under repair, but we believe they will be operational soon," Ackbar continued. "We must prepare for a new Imperial offensive."

Wedge raised a hand. "Against us, Admiral, or against one of the warlords?"

Ackbar nodded at Drayson, who stepped forward and said, "At this time, we think Isard is more concerned with the warlords. With Grunger out of the way she can turn her

attention to Zsinj and Teradoc, who have been claiming large chunks of the Outer Rim, or to Harrsk in the Deep Core.”

“I’m always happy to take advantage of Imperial infighting,” Wedge said, “But why are *we* here?”

“With Isard distracted by the warlords, we’ve decided the time is right to reopen an offensive.”

“To where?” Wedge asked, still wondering how Fel fit into this. Six months after his defection, the military was still treating the former Imperial war hero cautiously and wasn’t in the habit of sharing prime intel with him.

“Not where,” Drayson said. “*Who.*”

At his signal, the holos re-shuffled. Grunger and Pitta disappeared. Grant shifted to one side and was joined by another face, dark-haired and scowling, set above a pair of gold epaulets.

“Octavian Grand and Afsheen Makati are the only two Grand Admirals still loyal to Isard,” Ackbar said. “They may be the only two left alive. Their defeat would prove a major blow to Isard’s authority, and to the Imperial war effort as a whole.”

The New Republic had made good progress in dealing with the Emperor’s elite commanders so far. The Empire itself had taken care of Zaarin after the man’s failed attempt to depose Palpatine. Declann and Teshik had fallen to the Rebel Alliance at Endor. Ackbar himself had vaporized Grand Admiral Syn at Kashyyyk eight months later. Grunger and Pitta had just killed each other. Fleet intel had reported Grand Admiral Batch murdered by his own crew a few months ago, Il-Raz had apparently killed himself after his Emperor’s demise, and there were rumors that Tigellinus and Takel had been executed by a group of Moffs.

That only left two men standing.

“We’re prioritizing the grand admirals then.” Fel spoke finally. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, intent.

Ackbar nodded. “Our forces have met Grand Admiral Grant in battle several times and never won. We know he has an aristocratic background, but in battle he is very adaptable and creative. Jan Dodonna once said he fought like one of our Rebels.

“As for Makati, it seems he was removed from active field duty after his appointment as Grand Admiral, so we have little experience interpreting his combat tactics. We hoped you could provide us with additional information.”

“Are you asking whether I knew these men personally?”

“We’re asking for whatever you can tell us,” Drayson said.

“I’m sure your intelligence files already have their backgrounds,” Fel eyed the admiral. “As for *personal* judgments... I never knew either well. Grant tended to shy away from Imperial court politics, which is a little surprising, given that his background. In person he tends to be... quiet. Thoughtful and reserved, some say haughty. But yes, I’ve heard he’s very ruthless in a fight. They say he’s not afraid to spend mens’ lives.”

“Sounds like Grunger and Pitta,” Wedge said.

Fel shook his head. “I said *spend*, not *waste*. Grant wins costly victories, but they’re still victories. If he doesn’t think a battle is worth fighting he doesn’t fight at all.”

“What about Makati?” asked Drayson.

“Makati’s a loyalist,” Fel said. “Since the Clone Wars devastated his homeworld, he believes in the New Order. He was never as fanatic as Il-Raz, but he still holds firm to all the Imperial tenants.”

“What was his role in Palpatine’s court?”

“He was around more than Grant, but not as much as Takel or Tigellinus. He had a reputation as a man who preferred to be in the field, but for some reason Palpatine sent him off the babysit the Corporate Sector for some time. He was the official Imperial Advistor there for two years, I believe, and no one could figure out why. It seemed like a waste. Some people said it was a punishment for something, but the Emperor’s punishments were usually less subtle. By all accounts, he treats his men well, though. His subordinates respect him.”

“And Grant? Do his people respect him?”

Fel thought for a moment, then said, “I’ve heard different things about Grant. Some officers, ones who’ve been loyal to him, have had his backing when they climb up the ranks. He rewards people he likes but I’ve heard his bad side is an awful place to be.”

"You seem certain that Makati will stand by Isard," Cracken said. When Fel nodded, he asked, "What about Grant? You said he doesn't like to play politics."

"No, which is probably why he hasn't attached himself to any warlord."

"Do you think he's hedging his bets, waiting for a place to move?"

"I can't say." Fel shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry I can't be more helpful."

"It's all right," Drayson said. "We weren't relying on you anyway."

Fel laughed dryly. "How reassuring."

Drayson snapped his fingers, and Grant and Makati disappeared. In their place was a holo-image of one planet, orbited by two moons and a single space station.

"Your next mission will be to Boudolayz," Drayson said.

"It's a Ubiqtorate base," Fel said, naming the top organization for Imperial intelligence and strategic planning.

The admiral nodded. "We've been watching it for the past few months. We believe it is the most vulnerable of their data storage centers."

"Do you want us to raid this place for information, or just destroy it?" asked Wedge. "The latter's more of Rogue Squadron's specialty."

"We know, which is why you'll be flying cover for a team of Fleet Intel operatives," Drayson said.

"Slicers, you mean? We'll be raiding their data center?"

Drayson nodded, and Wedge felt a stupid spike of hope. There was no reason to think the Ubiqtorate's intel files on Syal were at that base; there was also no reason to think they *weren't*.

"That won't be subtle," Fel said. "If Makati or Grant know we've raided their intel base, it will only encourage them to change strategy."

"Not if everything goes according to plan," Ackbar said. His large eyes fixed on Wedge and Fel both. "To all observers at Boudolayz, gentlemen, we won't even step foot on their station."

"And how will we manage *that*?" Wedge asked.

“Commander Antiles,” Drayson said, “You and your people are going to be involved in a little... sleight of hand.”

Wedge laughed once, in disbelief. But the admirals up there weren’t laughing, and neither was Baron Fel.

After Wedge Antilles and Soontir Fel received their briefing and left the room, Drayson, Cracken, and Ackbar lingered for a moment on the stage. Cracken glanced sidelong at Drayson and asked the admiral, “Are you sure your people can handle this?”

“I’m sure. They can’t wait to add a couple more grand admirals to their resume.” Drayson crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the Mon Cal. “Admiral, using Rogue Squadron as cover was your idea. I vouched for my people. I want to hear you vouch for yours one more time.”

Ackbar seemed to take no offense, but Mon Cal faces were always hard to read. “Rogue Squadron are our best, and not only in the cockpit. They can fight on the ground too. They proved that on Ciutric.”

Drayson scowled. “They lost Pestage on Ciutric, not to mention one of their own. And they had a full commando team with them then.”

“The mission to retrieve Pestage was an exceptional case,” Cracken interjected. “Isard surprised us and Krennel surprised Isard. The Rogues were trapped on Ciutric with no backup for days. The fact that they made it off that planet alive is proof of their abilities.”

Drayson didn’t seem convinced. “They’re also down to nine pilots now. That’s three short of a full squad. And what about Fel?”

“He’s given us no reason to doubt his loyalties,” Ackbar said. “He flew with distinction at Ciutric and Mindor.”

“That just shows his technical skill.” Drayson glanced at Cracken. “Anything on his wife?”

Cracken shook his head. “No, and I have my best people looking for her.”

“I suppose if Isard got her we’d already know,” Drayson said darkly. “It’s possible the other warlords are after her too. They’ll figure if they can claim her, they can make Fel fight for them.”

“We’re covering all options.”

Drayson raised an eyebrow. “I take it you’re not willing to say any more.”

Cracken shook his head.

“For the moment, Airen’s people are doing all they can.” Ackbar spread his webbed hands. “As will we for this mission.”

“Of course,” Drayson nodded. “I apologize if I came off a brusque just now.”

“Not at all. We all understand the stakes of this mission.”

“Thank you. I need to check on my people. I’ll see the both of you tomorrow.”

“Calm dreams, my friend.”

Drayson climbed up to the top of the amphitheater and went out through the main doors. After that he began the long trek to the aft decks of *Home One*, into the section specially built into Ackbar’s flagship for the most senior naval officers and Provisional Council members. The bulkheads were triple-enforced to absorb concussion blasts and block out almost all known forms of sensor sweeps. Only a tiny handful had proper security clearance to enter the restricted zone; neither Antilles nor Fel were among them.

Reyan Dey’rylan watched Drayson the whole time, tracking him on *Home One*’s security cameras just as he’d watched everything in the briefing room. Those camera feeds were encrypted and blocked to all but a handful with the proper clearance; Dey’rylan had been able to slice into them easily and watch them all from the admiral’s personal office. When Drayson was entering the code for his door, the black-furred Bothan leaned back in the admiral’s chair and kicked both boots up on his desk.

Drayson stepped inside. The door shut behind him. He cast a most baleful glare on Dey’rylan. “Well,” he said, “You’re lucky I don’t shoot you.”

“You don’t have your sidearm,” Dey’rylan pointed out.

“There’s guards outside. I’m sure they’d be happy to do it.”

Silence lingered between them for a moment; then Dey’rylan bore his canines in a Bothan grin. Drayson allowed a reluctant smirk, then added, “Seriously, get out of my chair.”

Dey'rylan popped to his feet and walked over to the proper side of Drayson's desk so the admiral could take his seat. Drayson glanced at the viewscreen built into his desktop and said, "I take it you were watching the whole show."

"Briefing included, and what came after." Dey'rylan said. He leaned forward, black paws on the edge of the desk. "I appreciate that you vouched for us, I really do."

"You shouldn't need vouching for. Without your team we'd have never gotten Batch, Syn, Grunger, or Pitta."

"We were just doing our jobs," Dey'rylan said with affected modesty.

Truth be told, he knew some of his people were a little irked that they got no credit for their kills, especially after Tralus. One of their own had died on that op; a Corellian named Sheer Valeen who'd infiltrated *Aggressor* and piped all the fleet's tactical data directly to the torpedo sphere in order to give Pitta his secret weapon against Grunger's bigger fleet. No one had actually expected Grunger to take his flagship on a suicide run. Dey'rylan knew that Sheer would have accepted that her life was a bargain to kill two grand admirals and countless more Imperials besides.

Still, it was unfair that no one would ever know the role she'd played. The martyrs who'd died to recover the Second Death Star plans were now feted as heroes among their fellow Bothans. Dey'rylan had known a number of them personally, and counted Koth Melan as a mentor. The kind of work his people were doing now was dirtier and required more secrecy. Dey'rylan just hoped that when all the grand admirals were dead, someone would tell their story.

"Do you really think we'll find what we're looking for at Boudolayz?" he asked Drayson.

The human shrugged his thin shoulders. "Frankly, I think it's the best place to look."

"Do you really think Isard will sent Makati or Grant out to fight the warlords?"

"She needs to reassert her authority. Krennel embarrassed her by capturing Pestage a making Ciutric his little kingdom. We already took Syn from her. Zsinj and Kaine have laid claim to almost as many systems as she has herself."

"But Isard holds Coruscant."

“And the Core.” Drayson nodded.

“I suppose the odds of a new push are out of the question?”

For the first nine months after Endor, it had felt like the New Republic was riding the crest of a wave. They’d taken Kashyyyk and Thyferra, vaporized Syn, then grabbed Brentaal, their first foothold in the Core. At the time, it had felt like they were just a stone’s throw away from Coruscant itself. Since then, Isard had deposed Pestage and consolidated the military. They’d been embarrassed at Ciutric and their victory at Mindor had been the kind they couldn’t afford any more of. Coruscant seemed far away again.

“I’ve talked this over with Ackbar and the other commanders,” Drayson said. “They all agree that right now we need to restock, resupply, rebuild. We need to consolidate what we’ve gained this past year.”

“I’m no admiral, so I’ll bow to their wisdom,” Dey’rylan shrugged. “But are they really serious about this, going after Makati and Grant?”

“Ackbar feels that if we can take Isard’s last two grand admirals, her authority will crumble.”

Dey’rylan leaned in close. “And how far is he willing to go? Pitta and Grunger were easy, they were already at each other’s throats. Syn wasn’t hard either. Kasck and I sabotaged his drag ships when they were in drydock. Devin and Jekk fed him false intel. Ackbar took care of the rest. And for Batch, we just had to slip some credits to his first officer. All of it’s looked pretty clean so far.”

Drayson leaned back in his chair. “For the moment, the brass is hoping to take them in a fight. That would make for the best PR. They’re trying to make the Republic look like a respectable government instead of a bunch of assassins.”

There it was, the nasty word, the one they tried to talk around all the time. Dey’rylan heard it and didn’t flinch. He knew what he was, what the New Republic needed him and his team to be.

“Sir, you created Alpha Black for one purpose. Our job is to kill grand admirals.”

Drayson blinked once, then said, “We’ll consider all options. And take any opportunity we can get.”

“And the other brass?”

"I'll bring them around to my way of thinking. As a saying goes, it easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission."

Dey'rylan nodded. "I'm glad to hear it."

Drayson allowed one weak smile. "I'm glad we understand each other, Reyan."

"So am I, sir. So am I."

The next day they returned to the same room for a more thorough briefing. This time the amphitheater was all filled up. The Rogues took one side of the room, all nine of them. Drayson's strike team took up the other, and the two sides eyed each other a little warily across the aisle.

There were five beings on the covert ops team- two Bothans, two humans, and one flat-faced, green-skinned Em'liy. As for the Rogues, they were far from a full unit. They'd been short of a complete dozen pilots even before Ciutric, where they'd lost Ibtisam. They'd gotten through the meat grinder called Mindor intact, but shortly there-after Plourr had resigned her commission to return to her homeworld of Eiattu. That left them at nine pilots, and five minutes into the briefing, Drayson told Wedge that he'd need to loan one of his Rogues to fly their shuttle.

That would bring them down to eight, just two-thirds of a real squad, and Wedge mustered his objection more politely than most beings would have.

"Is that really necessary, sir?" he asked. "I'm a little surprised you don't have even people who can pilot a shuttle. What kind of flying are your people going to need?"

"We need someone who can maneuver a *Mu*-class shuttle through a combat zone of unpredictable ferocity," the black-furred Bothan squad leader, Dey'rylan, said. "We used to have a combat pilot. Her name was Sheer. She was our agent onboard *Aggressor* at Tralus."

Chastened but insistent, Wedge pressed, "I'm sorry for your loss, but if we're going to be taking on a whole garrison's worth of TIEs, I don't want to do it with just eight X-wings."

He glanced at the three commanders on the platform for appeal. General Cracken said simply, "Reserve units will be standing by in case of emergency."

His tone made clear he wasn't going to tell anything more. Need to know, probably. Wedge allowed a tiny sigh, then turned to look his pilots over.

"Do you need someone you can dress up in an Imp uniform?" he asked.

"Very much so," said Drayson. "You should also be aware that the data center at Boudolayz is staffed by the navy but managed by the Ubiqtorate, which means they might have upper-level intel staff onhand."

In other words, that meant no non-humans and nobody a smart Imp intel operative might recognize on sight. The first part ruled out Xarce Huwla, a Tunroth, and Nrin Vakil, a Quarren. The second part cut the ranks even more. Wedge himself was too well-known; Tycho Celchu and Hobbie Klivian were Imperial defectors turned ace pilots and might be on someone's watch-list. Young Avan Beruss was the nephew of Doman Beruss, a member of the New Republic's governing council, so a particularly well-studied spook might know him too. And obviously there was no way they'd be sending Baron Fel into an Imperial base.

That narrowed it down to Wes Janson and Feylis Ardele. The two of them happened to be sitting next to each other on the bench behind Wedge, and both seemed to stiffen before his eyes.

Janson was a veteran flyer and a good friend. Feylis was greener, but almost as good a pilot. He felt ashamed to realize that losing Janson would hurt him more personally, though for all he knew slipping into that Imp base would be safer than flying around it.

To his surprise, Feylis raised one hand and said, "I'll do it, sir."

"Feylis!" Avan whispered beside her and put a hand on her arm.

"Please, sir. I got my start flying shuttles on Contruum. I've even flown Mus before."

Wedge's eyes shifted to Janson. The pilot didn't say anything, but Wedge knew him enough to read his eyes.

He gave Janson the slightest shake of the head and said, "Feylis, you'll take the shuttle. Janson, I'm going to want you in your X-wing."

"Understood," they said in unison. Both kept their faces blank, but beside Feylis, Avan's expression wilted in disappointment and concern. Wedge tried to remember the last time he'd felt that kind of aching concern for anyone, then quickly pushed it aside.

The rest of the briefing went as planned, and when it was finished, Wedge invited the entire squad for a meal at the officer's kitchen. Xarccé declined, saying she had reserved time on *Home One*'s fitness deck. Feylis and Avan, suddenly awkward together, excused themselves. Fel declined too and so did Nrin.

So, as Wedge had half-expected, it came down to the four of them: himself, Tycho, Hobbie, and Janson. Wedge had reserved the dining room for a bigger group and felt vaguely like he was abusing rank when it came down to just his three friends. Still, the kitchen well was the best-stocked on *Home One*, and while Wedge had never picked up any culinary skills, Janson somehow knew to recipe for a deliciously spicy Taanab-style meatloaf, which they washed down with a shared bottle of Vultiin wine Hobbie had picked up during the fight for Brentaal six months back.

It should have been an evening to relax with friends. But of course, they ended up talking about the mission.

"So how do you plan to organize it," Tycho asked, "With eight pilots, I mean?"

"I know we've been doing three flights of three," Wedge said, "But I think this time we'll just do wing pairs."

"Four sets of two," Hobbie said. "Well, as good as anything, I guess."

"Do you think Feylis will be okay in the shuttle?" Janson asked seriously.

"She's got lots of hours in heavy birds," Wedge said. "But for the record: no, that's not why I picked her over you."

Janson frowned. "Then why?"

"Because when I turned you down, you trusted I had a satisfying reason." He paused, then added, "*Right, Wes?*"

"Huh? Oh, right. I'm not blaming you. I was just—"

"—Wondering, I know. The point is, you trust my judgment. You accept it."

"Yeah, of course."

"Feylis is newer. Younger. She puts up a good front but you can tell she's still insecure about her flying skills. If I turned her down, she'd be wracking her-self with it, second-guessing herself, and when she got in her X-wing at Boudolayz her head wouldn't be in the fight. So she gets to fly the shuttle. And you get to do what you do."

Janson thought it over a moment, took a sip from his glass, and said, "Okay, I'll admit. I'm satisfied."

"Aren't you glad Wedge is in charge?" Hobbie asked.

"Always am. He's totally better at thinking things through than I am."

"Well, *that's* not hard."

"I've already put together the flight roster," Wedge said. "I'll post it once we're done here."

"What are you doing with Fel?" Tycho asked.

"I'm putting him with Nrin."

Hobbie winced. "Are you sure?" Nrin was never one to keep his opinions to himself, and he'd been by far the most hostile to Fel's joining the squadron.

"They're never going to like each other," Wedge said, "But they need to be able to work together,"

"I guess we'll just have to trust your judgment again," Janson yawned and stretched out his limbs.

Seriously, Tycho asked, "Wedge, have you heard anything else from Cracken?"

From his look, from his tone, it was clear *anything else* meant *Syal*. Wedge's relationship with Fel's wife was still a secret from the rest of the galaxy, but he would have felt wrong holding the information back from his squadron. He shook his head.

"It's been almost half a year," Hobbie said.

"I've noticed."

"I'm sure Cracken's spooks are doing their jobs, Wedge," said Janson.

"I'm a little surprised Fel and his wife didn't have, I don't know, some backup plan," Hobbie said, "Some place to go hide if things went to hell."

"Fel was never on good terms with Isard, but I don't think either of them were expecting this. I think if they planned to run, they planned to run together." Wedge sighed and looked

down at the debris on his dinnerplate. "In a weird way, I still envy Fel."

"How so?" Tycho sounded confused.

"He's at least *seen* Syal in the past year. The past..." He paused, tried to count.

"How long?" asked Hobbie.

"Almost twenty," Wedge sighed.

Janson slumped in his chair. "Wedge, do you even *remember* your sister?"

"I do. But it's all... So vague. I don't remember specifics, but I remember *her*. She was always very... strong-willed. Energetic. A big dreamer."

"She'd have to be. She ran away from her parents' fuel station and ended up the biggest holo-star in the Empire."

"I remember her getting into fights with Mom and Dad. And when she ran away, Dad went on and on about how she'd end up regretting it, how she's come back one day..." He shook his head and sighed. "I think I believed him. Up until Gus Treta Station burned up. Mom and Dad with it. I thought I lost Syal the same time I lost them. And I got used to it. And then I stepped into that interrogation room with Fel."

He didn't want to say any more. There were a lot people, especially in the Rebel Alliance, who'd lost their families. Being a Rebel, hearing about other people's tragedies, had actually helped him come to terms with his own. And he'd been okay with being alone, used to it, more or less. Until Fel showed up.

"When Fel trained me at the Academy," Tycho said, "I remember thinking, *That man is cold as ice*. Most of the time, I thought he acted more like a droid in an Imp uniform."

"He still seems like that," muttered Janson.

"Later on, I'd heard he married Wynssa Starflare," Tycho went on. "And it surprised me. Really shocked me. I wondered if I'd even known the man at all."

"He doesn't seem like an easy man to get close to," Hobbie said.

"He's not," Wedge said, thinking without saying, *He's the only family I've got*.

The room fell into awkward silence before Janson said, "Well, at least he's on our side now," and finished off his glass with one loud gulp.

Soontir Fel was seated at the end of the bar-counter furthest from the entrance and furthest from any other patrons, but he could still see Feylis and Avan, their bright heads visible in the low light of *Home One's* sole but spacious cantina. They seemed to be leaning in close over their small table, probably to hear each other's soft, tender words over whatever raucous music was playing on the overhead speakers. Fel watched them from the corner of his eye. For a moment he saw Feylis's blonde hair fall forward, hiding her face behind a gold curtain, the way Syal's always had, and something stabbed him in the heart. Then a hand flicked the curtain back behind an ear and it was just Feylis again. Avan reached out and clasped her hand in both of his. Fel couldn't watch any more. He turned away.

He normally spent his nights alone, but he'd felt the urge to come to here tonight. Wedge and Tycho, his executive officer, had private rooms, but the other Rogues were all crammed into communal barracks. He felt like being by himself tonight but there was no way he'd get it in his bunk, so he'd decided to try for anonymity in public.

It wasn't working. The dim light didn't change the fact that he had one of the most recognizable faces in the galaxy; and to a shipful of Rebels, the most hated. At the beginning, after he'd defected, he'd met resentment and suspicion in the eyes of every single being he encountered, every single day. In the other Rogues, at least, that had slowly melted away. He still rarely socialized with his squadmates, but after Ciutric and Mindor, he'd at least earned their begrudging trust. The thing with being a Rogue was that you were always on the move, and whenever you moved someplace knew you dredged up the same old resentment and suspicion all over again.

At least here on *Home One*, they left him alone. They gave him space, and if he could ignore the sidelong looks, and something like privacy.

He was halfway through his first glass of Tralian whiskey when the bubble of privacy was broken. He heard the stool

next to him squeal with new weight and looked sideways to see Nrin Vakil wave down the bartender, another Quarren, and order some kind of drink only their race enjoyed.

Nrin waited until he got his cup to glance at Fel and say, "Commander Antilles just updated the duty roster. We're to be wingmates on this next mission."

"I see."

The tentacles around Nrin's mouth parted so he could lift the glass to his face. A long pink tongue darted out from between two white fangs, then curled up around the edges so Nrin could suck up his drink like he was using a straw. He downed a third of whatever the briny beverage was before that long tongue darted back into his mouth. He put the glass down. The tentacles dangled limp from his face again.

"Rogue Seven," Nrin said, "And Rogue Eight."

Fel barely kept from staring. It was times like these that he was reminded how *alien* some of his compatriots were. Growing up on a Corellian farm, he'd barely seen any non-humans. Likewise, in the Empire's service. For so long he'd bought easily into the Empire's doctrine of human supremacy. He'd learned better even before he defected, but it was still hard to shake.

"I am Rogue Seven," Nrin clarified.

"Then I have your wing."

"You follow my lead."

Fel took another sip. "All right then."

He looked away from Nrin, stared off into the dark. Silence lingered between them. He heard Nrin pick up his glass, slurp up more of his drink, and put it down again.

Finally, Nrin said, "You do not come here often."

It was a statement. "You do?"

Fel regretted saying it instantly. It had been almost five months since Ibtisam had died. He knew her relationship with Nrin had been a complicated one. There was a long history and enmity between Quarrens and Mon Cals, but antagonism had gradually given ground to affection, and that affection had never been allowed to fully bloom before her death.

To live in the wake of that, with so many layers of regret, was not a thing he'd wish on any being.

Nrin was a proud one. Even his pain he bore like a badge of honor. He said, "This is a fine establishment. They serve many delicacies you rarely find off Dac."

Fel glanced down at his Tralian whiskey. His father had liked to keep a bottle on a high shelf, and only broke it out for special occasions. Fel's first taste of liquor had been poured from that bottle, to celebrate his acceptance at the Imperial Naval Academy.

"Are you feeling homesick?" he asked, still looking at his glass.

After another pause, Nrin asked, "Are you?"

He thought for a moment. "No."

"Neither am I."

Fel took another sip, and took a moment to savor the burn before swallowing. He heard Nrin suck up more of his drink. When the Quarren was done he asked, "Any word of your wife?"

"Of course not," he said, regretting that he couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice.

"You should cheer up," Nrin said, cheerlessly. "You still have hope." When Fel said nothing, he went on, "Have you ever wondered if, perhaps, NRI *has* found your wife? Perhaps they have her locked up somewhere safe, and are keeping her hidden so they can keep dragging you along in the Republic's service. Commander Antilles might even be in on the ruse."

Fel turned to glare at the Quarren. The idea *had* crossed his mind, repeatedly.

"Or," Nrin said smoothly. "Perhaps she is dead. NRI knows this, and they lie to you, *and* Commander Antilles. They lie to you to keep you hoping. To keep you loyal."

"I am loyal. I made my choice six months ago. Have I ever made you doubt it?"

Nrin's beady alien eyes met his for the first time. They stayed for only a second; then Nrin's darted away, as though he was embarrassed.

"I will never fight for Isard again," Fel said firmly.

"I trust you on that. But what about Zsinj, or Kaine, or Teradoc?"

"Even worse. None of them are worthy of my service."

"*Worthy?* Ah, I see," Nrin nodded. His voice took on a tone of condescension. "I'm very sorry to hear that. Just like I'm so sorry about Palpatine. After all, he must have been *worthy*, correct? You served *him* for many years."

"Did you come here for this?" Fel was having a hard time holding back his own anger. "I knew you didn't want to fly with me from the start. You, more than any of the others."

"Answer my question," Nrin growled. "Was Palpatine worthy?"

Their eyes locked again. They were both angry now, and they didn't look away.

"No," Fel said. "He was not."

"Then why did you serve him?"

"I made a mistake."

"Oh? And did you realize that before or after we captured you?"

"Do you really want to know? Or are you just baiting me?"

"I want to know. Tell me. When did you realize you'd been helping butcher innocents all this time?"

Fel took a deep breath, let it out. "Derra IV."

Nrin blinked, surprised, but didn't look away. The massacre of their convoy at Derra IV had been one of the Rebel Alliance's worst defeats.

"Why Derra IV? Was the slaughter too much for you?"

"No. It wasn't the battle."

"Then what was it?"

"They all said Vader planned that battle, that he was responsible. He wasn't."

Nrin's eyes narrowed, confused. "Who was?"

"An alien. A *sub-human*," Fel pronounced. Nrin didn't flinch at the slur. "I still don't know his name, but there was this alien in an admiral's uniform. With blue skin and these... glowing red eyes. He planned the attack at Derra IV. It was his masterstroke. The Empire was relying on an alien to save us from the Rebels. The hypocrisy was... too much."

"You didn't defect for almost two years after that," Nrin accused.

"You're right. But what happened there... It opened my eyes."

"Two years."

“When you’ve been carrying beliefs your whole life, it’s hard to let go.”

Nrin’s gaze wavered; he looked away, as though ashamed. Maybe he was thinking about Fel; more likely, Ibtisam.

Fel turned back to his drink. He swallowed the rest in one gulp.

“When we go to Boudolayz,” Fel said, “I will have your back.”

Nrin nodded, and softly said, “I know.”

Fel got off the stool, steadied himself, and walked out of the bar. It was a night to turn in early.

CHAPTER THREE

LHWEKK

The planet beneath had turned its night-side to face them, leaving only a narrow yellow-green crescent to shine with the light of its reflected sun. The night-blackness of Lhwekk made the battle in orbit all the more visible. A dozen black-hulled destroyers of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet formed a blockading ring around the planet, and every one of them was engaged in heated battle with the defending warships of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium.

The Ssi-ruuvi vessels, each one ovular and almost resembling a three-eyed face, engaged with the enemy with desperate ferocity. *Shree*-class battle cruisers, as massive as the largest Chiss destroyers, fired volley after volley from their turbolaser cannons and took the Chiss destroyers head-on while smaller *Wurrif*-class light cruisers tried to take the Chiss on their flanks. The Chiss warships were capable enough of a brutal slugging match, but their defensive batteries struggled to counter the Ssi-ruuvi battle droids. Pyramid-shaped fighters, each only two meters tall and armed with cannons at every corner, tumbled and danced through space in swarms like hungry fleshgnats. Powered by the life energy of captured slaves, the tiny drones weren't constrained by the stress of physics on living pilots and could fly literal circles around the clawcraft squadrons fielded by the Chiss.

Into the fray glided three pale wedge-shaped warships, unmistakably Imperial. The smallest, the *Immobilizer*-class interdiction vessel *Corvus*, hung in the rear, its four spherical

gravity well generators currently dormant. Ahead of it, the mile-long destroyers *Grey Wolf* and *Admonitor* entered the battle zone together.

Captain Dagon Niriz stood on *Grey Wolf*'s bridge, hands clasped behind his back, watching, waiting for the admiral seated beside him to give the order to engage. It had been four years since he'd been assigned to the side of then-captain Thrawn. At first, he'd been skeptical and frankly insulted to take orders from a strange alien commander in worthless, uncharted space. Everything that had happened since had taught him to trust Thrawn's judgment. He'd been at the man's side through battles against warlord Nuso Esva and their hunt for treasonous Grand Admiral Zaarin, after which Thrawn had received his well-deserved reward and filled Zaarin's place as one of the Emperor's twelve elite.

Just as he'd learned to trust Thrawn in that time, he'd seen strange, exotic wonders he'd never imagined in his old life in the Core. These Ssi-ruuk were profoundly alien- massive saurian beasts, religious fanatics from an isolated star cluster who powered their war machine with the harvested life energy of countless captives- but in his time, Niriz had seen stranger.

One thing Niriz hadn't seen was Thrawn's own government, the one that had exiled him two decades ago. If Thrawn had had any contact with the Chiss Ascendancy in that time, Niriz hadn't heard about it. Yet here he was, coming to aid them as they struggled to strike the killing blow against the Ssi-ruuk.

Niriz wondered if they'd welcome the help.

They hung for a few minutes outside the battle zone, giving Thrawn time to analyze the fight as he sat in his command chair, hands folded in front of him, glowing red eyes narrowed in thought. Finally, he said, calmly, barely loud enough for Niriz to hear, "Captain, open a hailing frequency to the Chiss flagship."

"Yes, sir." Niriz paused. "Which vessel is that, sir?"

Thrawn's white-gloved hand gestured out the viewport. "The third vessel to the left of the daylight crescent. Can you see the extra pickets protecting it, Captain?"

"Ah, yes, sir."

“Good. Hail them and say we are here to help. Tell them if we do not receive orders within two minutes, we will begin acting of our own initiative against the Ssi-ruuk.”

“Very good, sir.”

Niriz hurried over to the comm station and relayed the order. The bridge crew was a strange mélange, half human and half a mix of aliens collected from across the Unknown Regions, including green-scaled Troukree, blue-skinned, red-eyed Chiss personally loyal to Thrawn, and more. It was something else he'd never have imagined back in the Core. The one thing they had in common was that they all looked nervous.

Two minutes went by and there was no response. When he reported it to Thrawn, the grand admiral seemed unsurprised.

“We will act on our own initiative, then,” he said calmly. “We’ll begin by doing something about those fighter screens. First, move us close enough so we draw the enemy’s attention. Tell Captain Parck to do the same. *Corvus* is to hold position outside the battle zone.”

As ordered, *Grey Wolf* and Parck’s *Admonitor* descended as one into Lwhekk’s orbit. The closest Chiss vessel was taking heavy fire from a pair of *Wurrif*-class cruisers. On the star destroyers’ approach, they began to shift position, putting the Chiss destroyer in between them and the newcomers while continuing to pound the destroyer’s flank.

From his place at the tactical station, Niriz reported, “Admiral, that assault carrier in lower orbit is coming up to meet us. It’s launching fighters.”

“Launch missile boats. Tell Captain Parck to do the same.”

Niriz had studied all the intelligence they had on the Ssi-ruuk, and he knew that a *Sh’ner*-class carrier like the one approaching could carry over one hundred of those pesky droid starfighters. He also knew that the vessel itself was lightly-defended compared to a large cruiser. The hard part would be getting close enough to destroy it.

One squadron of missile boats dropped out of *Grey Wolf*, another out of *Admonitor*. The fighter-sized attack craft had been designed for a single purpose during the hunt for Grand Admiral Zaarin: to counter Zaarin’s TIE Defenders. These Ssi-ruuvi fighters were tiny and disposable, the exact

opposite of Defenders, but Thrawn seemed confident the same tactics would be successful here.

The missile boats streaked ahead in a tight line, and the Ssi-ruuvi fighter swarm raced to meet them. Then the boats fired their missiles as one; two warheads each from two dozen fighters streaked ahead, trailing tight parallel thrust-trails that quickly became white tangles as the missiles locked on and tracked their dancing targets.

The missiles used to counter Zaarin's TIE Defenders had been designed to punch through heavy shields. These warheads were modified to explode one quarter second before impact, in order to better catch more tiny, vulnerable fighters with a maximum yield burst. A chain of explosions spread out in front of them; the missile boats peeled into a tight loop so they could make another pass.

When the explosions died down and sensor readings came in, it was clear that the high-yield missiles had done their job. The wave of fighters had been cut nearly in half. One more coordinated volley from the missile boats cut them even deeper. After that, *Grey Wolf* launched its TIE fighters to pick off the remaining droids.

"Captain," Thrawn said when it was done, "Move us in to engage the carrier. Tell Captain Parck to take out those two light cruisers. Send both squads of missile boats to help. Also, have *Corvus* get ready to raise her interdiction field."

After Niriz relayed the order, he watched as the assault carrier swelled in their forward viewport. To the side, he could see *Admonitor* move on the crippled Chiss destroyer. The two *Wurrif* light cruisers turned and ran, and Parck's vessel slipped past the destroyer to pursue.

The assault carrier, unexpectedly vulnerable, tried to run toward the planet's surface. That was when Thrawn gave the order for *Corvus* to fire up its gravity wells. By creating a second gravitational pull, as strong as Lwhekk's itself, they arrested the carrier's descent. As its engines strained to adjust to the sudden shift, *Grey Wolf* opened fire with its forward turbolasers. After three volleys, they punched through the carrier's shields and exploded its engine section. Its hull disintegrating, its propulsion gone, the carrier began a fiery plunge toward the planet's night-side face.

Muted cheers rippled across the bridge as the crew watched the assault carrier's tumble into Lwhekk's atmosphere.

"I believe we have our opening," Thrawn said. "Captain, launch ground assault teams."

"All of them, sir?"

"All. Delegate a fighter squadron to escort the Five Hundred and First. Make sure they get to the capital."

"Yes, sir."

"And Captain, tell *Corvus* to shut down her gravity well, but be ready to raise it again. Take us to help Captain Parck."

Niriz understood what he was aiming for. This Imperial and Chiss vessels had artificial gravity systems that could compensate for *Corvus*'s second gravwell. On Ssi-ruuk vessels, which required far fewer crew than their enemies' vessels, the artificial gravity systems were less advanced. By raising and lowering its grav well at intervals, *Corvus* could keep the Ssi-ruuk literally off-balance.

After they launched the ground assault teams, *Grey Wolf* pivoted to cut across the planet's lower orbit and catch up with *Admonitor*. Parck's vessel had destroyed one light cruiser but the second had fled into the protective range of two *Shree*-class heavy cruisers. Both vessels were pummeling *Admonitor* head-on and Parck had turned his vessel to show them his starboard length. He was firing broadsides at both vessels and spreading their attacks across a larger span of his shields, but he still wouldn't last much longer.

The Chiss destroyers, for their part, seemed unwilling to help.

The light cruiser Parck had been chasing spun around to harass *Grey Wolf* as it hurried to *Admonitor*'s aid. As the bridge rocked under its assault, Niriz heard one of the tactical ensigns, a human, mutter, "Some help the Admiral's people are."

"Remind me why we're sticking out necks out for them," grunted another human.

Niriz should have admonished them, but he agreed. The Chiss fleet seemed perfectly satisfied to let its wayward son die here, after he'd come all this way to help them.

"Captain," Thrawn called, still seated calmly in his command chair, "Tell *Corvus* to fire up her gravity wells."

“With pleasure, sir.”

“And launch all our Starwings, with escorts. It’s time to put them to work.”

As expected, the raising of the interdiction field caused the light cruiser to falter. At the same time, two full squadrons of Xg-1 Starwing craft dropped out of *Grey Wolf*’s hangar. The basis for missile boats, Starwings were small, dedicated anti-capital ship attack craft. The experimental ships had never gained widespread production in the Imperial navy but, like missile boats, Thrawn had an attachment to their capacity for quick, direct strikes.

While a squadron of TIEs tried to keep another swarm of droid fighters off their backs, the Starwings raced to intercept the light cruiser. Two passes were all it took to cripple the vessel, and as *Grey Wolf* pulled ahead its aft turbolaser cannons cracked open the vessel’s hull and spilled its entrails into space.

After that, the Starwings raced ahead to help *Admonitor*. *Grey Wolf* pulled to a higher elevation so that its diamond hull crossed over *Admonitor*’s broadside at a perpendicular angle. As the missile boats lit up the swarms of attacking droid fighters, the Starwings began their initial assault on the heavy cruiser sitting on the inner edge of Lwhekk’s orbit. *Admonitor* and *Grey Wolf* fired concentrated volleys on both ships, but the Starwings cracked open their target’s shields first. With its defenses overwhelmed, the cruiser was helpless and both destroyers shifted their fire to tear up the cruiser’s face. Its engines sputtered and died and it began to drift in space, falling slowly toward Lwhekk’s surface.

There was just a hint of satisfaction in Thrawn’s voice as the grand admiral said, “Captain, tell *Corvus* to revive her gravity well.”

When the interdicator brought her field online, the dying cruiser was arrested in its fall. Then, slowly, it began to be tugged in the opposite direction by *Corvus*’ gravitational pull. The other cruiser, now desperately holding off two star destroyers, was unable to move out of the way as its dead sibling was smashed against its starboard flank. Its shields, already overwhelmed, simply died. The two cruisers smashed together, scraping apart hull armor and opening

decks to the vacuum. *Admonitor* and *Grey Wolf* continued their fire, tearing both ships to pieces.

The cheers that time were less muted. Even Niriz allowed himself a grin as he marched up to Thrawn and asked, "What now, sir?"

The grand admiral wasn't smiling. Red eyes narrowed in thought, he said, "I believe it's time we try hailing the Chiss flagship again. Perhaps now they're more willing to speak."

Niriz doubted that somehow, but he turned to give the order anyway. Before he could open his mouth, one of the tactical lieutenants shouted, "Sirs! They're changing tactics!"

"Explain," said Thrawn.

"It's the picket ships. They're picking up speed and... They're accelerating to the nearest destroyers."

"All power to shields!" Niriz snapped.

They shunted energy to the bridge shields just in time to stop a *Fw'Sen*-class picket ship on a suicide run. The impact and explosion still rocked the command deck hard, nearly knocking Niriz off his feet. The Ssi-ruuk had dozens of those ships, each one no bigger than a tramp freighter and crewed only by the brown-scaled P'w'eck undercaste. During the intel briefings, there had been some debate as to whether the P'w'eck had minds of their own and might turn on their overlords. Now the answer was clear.

The Ssi-ruuk masters had ordered all their slaves to die, and the slaves were dying without question. Somewhere beneath the panic, Niriz felt sick.

Voice tense, Thrawn said, "Tell all missile boats and Starwings to kill those pickets. Targets of opportunity. Don't stop until they're all destroyed."

The attack vessels broke formation and began their pursuit of the suicidal pickets. On Thrawn's orders, they ranged far beyond *Grey Wolf's* defensive zone and started picking off ships making runs on the Chiss vessels. They did the best they could, with the help of the CEDF's clawcraft, but the pickets were too many and too determined to die. A pair of pickets slammed into a Chiss destroyer's engine sections; the resulting explosion consumed the whole ship. Another picket caught a destroyer with weak bridge shields and vaporized the entire command deck.

The CEDF pickets and starfighters did their best to keep the command ship safe, but the suicidal P'w'eck ships seemed drawn to it. One ship slammed into its bow shields; another into its dorsal section. The second one tore open the defensive screen as it died, and shrapnel and debris ripped through a section of the flagship's hull. A trio of pickets slipped past the clawcraft and raced for the bridge. Before they could ram, a pair of missile boats dropped behind them and unleashed a wave that caught all three. Their hulls cracked and burst into flame. Twisted metal skidded and skipped across the bridge shields but did not tear through.

Finally, when all the pickets were dead, the remaining Ssi-ruuvi ships began to fall back to Lwhekk's inner orbit, like they needed to conference about what to do next.

Niriz was just grateful for the breather.

"Admiral," a Chiss comm officer called, "The CEDF flagship just hailed us."

"What did they say?" Thrawn asked.

"Just... 'Thank you,' sir."

Thrawn's stiff body seemed to relax. He sunk back into his chair and, just for a moment, Niriz caught the rarest of sights: a tight, satisfied, smile.

As the 501st fell on the Ssi-ruuvi capital, dawn was just a faint glow in the sky. Daric LaRone hoped it got brighter fast. He'd seen a lot of strange things since joining Thrawn's service in the Unknown Regions, but there was something especially creepy about a city made from hundreds of fragile-looking, glowing spires all thrusting high into the night.

As their DX-9 dropship banked low above the spire peaks, LaRone leaned forward to see if he could see any hostiles running around on the surface. He stuck his head out into the open air; wind batted against his stormtrooper's helmet but he barely felt it. They'd taken no anti-aircraft fire on the way down; it seemed like the Ssi-ruuk had been masters of their isolated star cluster for so long that they didn't bother to build defenses for their homeworld.

They should have given it a second thought before trying to invade the Chiss Ascendancy. They said the Ascendancy never made the first strike, but always made the last one.

LaRone couldn't make out much below, so he stuck his head back inside the landing craft and looked over the two squads of white-armored stormtroopers crammed into the hold with him. Behind those identical helmets was a big variety in faces: some Chiss and other kinds of alien, some human. Many had begun their careers as soldiers in Palpatine's empire only to end up serving Thrawn. That was more or less what had happened to LaRone, along with an interval running rogue after he'd shot an over-aggressive Imperial Security Bureau agent in self-defense.

LaRone switched the frequency of his helmet comlink. "Quiller, you read?"

"Loud and clear," his pilot said from the cockpit. Joak Quiller had been part of LaRone's stormtroopers squad and had joined him on the run.

"You find a landing zone?"

"There's a nice spot right in front of the palace."

"What defenses?"

"Still no anti-air. Looks like they're massing on the ground though. Mostly infantry, couple hardpoints."

"Unprepared, aren't they?"

"Overconfident. 'Course, they're putting up a hell of a fight in orbit."

"That's the grand admiral's job now. We've got ours."

"Agreed. Get your people ready to drop. We're gonna meet up with Marcross's squad, then hit dirt."

"Sounds good to me. Let's do it."

He felt the drop ship bank hard as Quiller aimed them for what intel briefings called the *Cree'n'ak*- the Ssi-ruuvi imperial palace. Thrawn was usually a master at gathering information but data was scarce on the Ssi-ruuk. Lucky for them, the CEDF attack fleet had carved up most of the Imperium's territory, leaving only the homeworld to be taken.

LaRone stuck his head out the side of the drop ship again and saw the imperial palace up ahead. Instead of just a single glassy light-spire, dozens were clustered together and stabbing up at the sky. It looked like a luminous, fragile version of the Emperor's palace back on Imperial Center, but supposedly these bright spires were as durable as the toughest quantum armor.

Their DX-9 dropped low. As his stomach tried to jump into his lungs, LaRone switched his comlink to his squad frequency and said, "Stand by for deployment."

Their lander shuddered as the repulsors kicked on and engine-thrust shrunk to a minimum. LaRone jumped out first and hit the ground hard in a forward roll that absorbed some of the impact-shock. He came up on his feet, E-11 rifle in both hands. He squad hit the dirt behind him; overhead, he could hear the roar of another drop ship as it settled next to Quiller's. He looked to the right and saw Marcross' squads piling into the open space.

LaRone switched his comlink freq again and called, "Your boys ready, soldier?"

"If yours are," Marcross said cheerily.

In truth, LaRone was a little worried. Their last big engagement had been against some of Nuso Esva's allies, and they'd taken heavy casualties. More than half the soldiers in his squad were greenies, mostly picked up from various planets in Thrawn's loose alliance against the savage warlord. Since they'd been tasked with building a storm-trooper unit for Thrawn's private army, one worthy the share a name with Vader's legendary 501st, they'd done their best to make good soldiers out of their new meat, but enthusiasm never really made up for inexperience.

All too often, it got potentially good soldiers killed.

He was about to tell Marcross that he was surprised they weren't taking fire. Then, of course, the shooting started. In this open space outside the palace they had little cover, and his troops ducked low and started scrambling for the edges of the plaza. He switched his helmet visual to infra-red and got a better look at the heat-bright saurian signatures of Ssi-ruuvi soldiers scampering around the bases of the city's spires, their bodies bent forward on powerful legs so their long tails and thick necks were straight lines parallel to the ground.

He switched his comm back to his squadron's freq and ordered them to charge the closest spire. The Ssi-ruuk scattered rather than hold their ground, and LaRone's team quickly took cover behind the spire's base.

"They fragging ran!" one of the new soldiers gawked.

"Cowards!" laughed another.

"Shut it!" LaRone said. He knew a strategic retreat when he saw one. Enemy laser-fire was still sizzling over their heads and they didn't have any space to move. "Wrass, what's the palace entrance look like?"

The squad's scout, a Chiss, peeked around the spire's curve. The scanners in his helmet made up for the lack of macro-binoculars. After a second, Wrass reported, "Looks like one big entry point, heavily barricaded. Gotta get up some steep steps too."

"What defense?"

"Lotta lizards up there, at least a dozen. Plus... Two gun turrets."

"Heavies?"

"Anti-personnel, looks like."

Before LaRone could think, someone squawked, "Hey, look out-"

Three Ssi-ruuk were on them before they knew it. With his IR on, all LaRone saw was a frenzy of bright light as the three saurian aliens appeared in their midst, long daggers jutting out from their wrists. He heard an awful scream-Wrass?- as one Ssi-ruuk swiped his blade across a soldier's neck, neatly slicing between helmet and chest-armor. Hot blood burst into the air.

LaRone fumbled to switch his helmet to normal visual, just in time for one red-scaled beast to snap its tail and hit him in the abdomen. LaRone went skidding across the ground. His E-11 tumbled just beyond his reach. He lurched forward, grabbed it, and rolled onto his back just in time for a Ssi-ruuk to stamp down on his chest with its massive three-clawed foot. The weight was excruciating; he couldn't breathe, only watch as the Ssi-ruuk leaned in close. Scent-tongues flicked out of its flaring nostrils; its vertical eye-pupils narrowed, as though it was examining his blank white helmet-face.

Then the creature reeled back. It opened its jaws and screamed in pain. LaRone, gasping for air, lay on the ground and watched as two more laser-blasts sparked against its rough red scales. A fourth, finally, caught the creature in the head, right between the eyes, and it tumbled to the ground.

As LaRone scrambled to his feet, a familiar voice said, "No need to think me, Sarge."

"Grave? When'd you drop?"

"Just after you."

He spun around, trying to spot Taxtro Grave's sniper unit. "Where'd you nest? I can't see you."

"Neither can they. Do what you do, LaRone. We'll cover your back."

LaRone nodded and hurried back to the base of the closest spire, where his men had finally put down the remaining two Ssi-ruuk. A quick scan of the fight zone made his stomach churn: those three lizards had killed eight of his men, and two more were on the ground with serious wounds.

"This is no fragging good, boss," said Sharvent, one of the older Troukree. "We can't storm that palace. They'll tear us up."

"Agreed," LaRone said. "Give me a sec."

He pressed his back to the spire's glass-smooth base and changed his comm channel yet again. "Brightwater, you there? We need some help."

"You need hot light?" the fifth member of his derelict stormtrooper squad said.

"As much as you can give. Are you getting through the city okay?"

"These lizards've never heard of streets, but yeah, we're on the way."

"Good. We'll hold until you get here." LaRone switched back to his standard comm freq and told his men, "Sit tight. Armor's almost here."

"Fragging lizards," Sharvent muttered as he fired a few shots from around the edge of the spire. The main plaza was clear of stormtroopers by now, but packs of Ssi-ruuk were still sprinting across the open space in different directions.

"Keep your head on. We'll get through this."

"Any word from up top, Sarge?" asked someone else. "Wrass, alive. Good."

"Not our business," LaRone said. "We get in, we get the Shreeftut. That's the plan."

"I'd rather just bomb the boss lizard and his whole crystal palace into nothing," said Sharvent.

"Tough. Thrawn wants it alive. So does the Ascendancy."

"More honorable that way," Wrass breathed, tone faintly mocking.

"I heard we couldn't crack that shell open if we wanted to." LaRone's corporal, another former Imperial soldier named Balkin, rapped his knuckles on the diamond-hard surface of the spire.

LaRone heard a rumbling sound and changed his comm to Brightwater's channel. "You ready to go?"

"Ready and willing."

"Good. Blast it."

LaRone gestured for his men to move to the far side of the spire. As they moved, Brightwater's hover-tank division began its assault. The projectiles whined through the air and dropped gracefully right on the steps leading to the palace. The trinity of explosions was so bright LaRone couldn't watch. He heard the sound of Ssi-ruuk wailing in pain and alarm and waved his men to charge.

Marcross's men moved in from the other side. Ssi-ruuk armed with rifles tried to stop them but the anti-personnel turrets on Brightwater's tanks sprayed laserfire that dropped some lizard and scattered more. Caught in a pincer, the remaining defenders at the entrance had no chance. Some retreated inside the palace walls; the rest were riddled with small arms fire until their heavy red-scaled corpses collapsed on the ground.

LaRone and Marcross moved their squads into the palace together. The Ssi-ruuk that had retreated from the entrance were nowhere to be seen. The main vestibule to the palace was tall and shockingly bright.

"Where are they?" Marcross asked. "Why aren't they attacking?"

"Leave a team here to guard the entrance," LaRone said. "We'll take the rest in, search this place floor-by-floor if we have to."

He had no idea how long that would take. As far as he knew, they were the first foreigners to step foot inside the Ssi-ruuvi capital in centuries.

Marcross told four of his men to hold position, then waved the rest forward. LaRone's group joined them. There were

still sounds of battle outside but it faded slowly as they delved deeper into the labyrinthine halls of the palace. The entire structure- walls, floor, ceiling- was all made of the same crystalline substance, and now that he was paying attention he saw its bright light refracting a full rainbow of colors.

Beside him, Marcross muttered what he was thinking: "How'd a bunch of ugly lizards build something this *pretty*?"

LaRone had no idea, but as they'd both learned over the past few years, the galaxy was full of wondrous things they'd never understand.

On LaRone's order, the squads split into smaller search parties. His was exploring the third level when Wrass' group reported, "We've found something, boss."

"Found *what*?" He'd sent Wrass to scout of the north wing of the palace while he and Marcross checked out the south.

"Don't have eyes on it yet, but it sounds like... *singing*."

LaRone got there as soon as he could. Sure enough, as he stood in what seemed like a vestibule for a larger chamber, he could hear high, musical piping on the other side of the massive crystalline double-doors.

He looked at Wrass and Wrass looked at him. The Chiss scout simply shrugged.

They still had to take precautions. He waited until Marcross' squad had joined them, then made sure everyone had E-11s ready. Then he and Wrass pushed the doors open.

LaRone wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't what he saw. There was a pile of dead Ssi-ruuk in the middle of the floor: red-scaled warriors, ones with blue and gold scales too. If he remembered those intel briefings right, blue-scales were ministers and gold-scales were priests. The Shreeftut- the boss lizard, as Sharvent had called it- was supposed to be a big blue-scale.

Whatever the scale color, all the dead Ssi-ruuk piled in the middle of the room were splashed in blood. Their deaths had been messy and probably very painful. He didn't doubt the Shreeftut was among them.

When he finally took his attention away from the dead Ssi-ruuk, LaRone finally noticed the ones doing the singing. They stood in a big circle around the pile of corpses, a good

two dozen in all. They were about half the size of the average Ssi-ruuk and all their scales were a dull brown. P'w'eck slaves, he recalled. Their claws were covered in blood and their raised their heads in the air to sing triumphant, wordless music.

“Huh,” grunted Marcross. “Guess they’ve got minds of their own after all.”

CHAPTER FOUR

CORUSCANT

It felt somehow appropriate to Grand Admiral Afsheen Makati that he always met Ysanne Isard here, in this hidden chamber buried deep inside Imperial Palace. When he'd met Palpatine, the Emperor had always been seated on his chair in the grand throne room, with a vast transparisteel window behind him looking out on the splendor of Imperial City. In greeting audiences like that, Palpatine had been showing off in two ways; he'd been saying *look at this city, it is mine*, and also *I show it my back and it means me no harm; I am invulnerable*.

Isard, though, always preferred to meet in the dark. She'd been the Emperor's spymaster like her father before her, and no one doubted she'd snared Armand Isard in a web of deception and lies just like she's gotten Sate Pestage, then Paltr Carvin's short-lived Interim Council. They said Pestage had been killed by Delak Krennel on Ciutric; as for old Isard and Carvin, they seemed to have just been erased from public and private record. So it went with most of Isard's enemies. Palpatine had possessed a throne room; she had a *lair*.

When he arrived for his meeting with Isard that day, Makati was surprised to find another man waiting in the same chamber. He was even more surprised to find it was Octavian Grant, the only other Grand Admiral still pledged to serve Isard, Grant was a short, thin man with about ten years on Makati. His white uniform always looked a little too big for him. When Makati entered the chamber, his narrow eyes darted to the other grand admiral; he greeted him with a wordless nod.

Makati nodded too and said nothing. He hadn't been expecting Grant; he hadn't even known Grant had returned to Imperial Center after his mission to the Corellian system. He'd heard about the battle itself, of course. He wasn't going to miss Grunger and Pitta personally, but in the deaths of two more Grand Admirals he felt lessened. The initial elite cadre of twelve, the Emperor's pride, had shrunk to almost nothing in the short space of a year and a half.

Isard kept them waiting but not for long. The door on the far side of the chamber opened and two crimson-robed Imperial guardsmen came out first. She traveled with them everywhere lately; it was her way of reminding everyone that she was the true heir of the Empire, not pretenders like Grunger or Zsinj. Then came Isard herself, and then two more guards, and then the door closed.

The guards formed a rigid line behind Isard as she stepped forward. She was a tall woman, and thick streaks of white through her hair made her look older than she was. Her uniform was the same scarlet color as the guardsmen's robes, and her gaze slipped back and forth between Grant and Makati. One eye was red, the other icy-blue; the combination never stopped being disconcerting. Makati felt like he was being probed; one eye seeing the surface, one eye seeing his inner thoughts.

But Isard was not Force-sensitive, only perceptive. She clasped her hands behind her back, mirroring the attentive postures of her grand admirals, and said, "Welcome. I'm glad I could gather both of you here today."

Grant bowed his head slightly. "I hurried back from Corellia as soon as I got your request."

Isard nodded, then turned her attention to Makati. The slight to Grant was obvious, but he hid his irritation. "And you, Afsheen. I've read your full report as well. Your mission to Scardia Station was a resounding success."

"I only wanted to punish those who defy your authority."

"Don't be coy," Isard said stonily. "I know you enjoyed bombing Kadann out of existence."

It was hard to deny that. Kadann and his so-called Prophets of the Dark Side were one of the many cults that had popped

into the open since Palpatine's death, claiming to use Jedi magic for their destructive ends.

"I did... savor it, Madam. The less Force-users in the galaxy, the better. And Kadann and I had a certain history."

"And now that history is over. Just like the histories of Grunger and Pitta." She looked back at Grant. "Do you mourn the deaths of your fellow grand admirals, Octavian?"

Grant shook his head. "They were traitors."

"And?"

"And I never much liked either in the first place. For obvious reasons."

Isard's smile was brittle. "I am as glad to see them dead as you. And I'm also glad you convinced the surviving captains from their fleets to recognize my authority."

"Madam, I believe most of them were simply glad to end the fighting. Many of those ships still need repairs. The docks at Corellia are still working to patch them up, as are the ones at Rothana and Damoria."

"I know. It gives me time to decide how to reorganize our forces." Isard's eyes narrowed. "How many operable star destroyers did you recover?"

"From both sides? I recovered twelve *Imperial*-class and eleven *Victory*-class vessels, plus two dozen more frigates, strike cruisers, and support craft."

Isard took a step closer. Her black boots clapped on the floor but Grant didn't flinch. "That is still less than half of the vessels that took part in the fight overall, correct?"

"Correct. Many of the vessels were destroyed or damaged beyond repair in the fighting."

She took a step closer, forcing Grant to tilt his head up to match her eyes. "That list includes the *Aggressor*."

"Grunger rammed Pitta's torpedo sphere with it, Madam. It couldn't be saved."

"And did you try?"

"We tried to salvage the wreckage, of course, but that sphere still had hundreds of armed warheads aboard when it blew. The destructive yield--"

"You did *nothing* to try to capture that ship. You and your fleet *sat* there and *watched* as Grunger and Pitta tore each other apart. Dozens of ships, including *Aggressor*, lost, and

why?" When Grant didn't answer, she leaned in closer. "*Why, Octavian?*"

"I assessed the situation and took the most prudent course of action.," Grant said. To his credit, he kept his voice steady and his eyes on hers. Makati wondered if he could have managed the same.

"Prudent action?" Isard sneered.

"Prudent and *wise*."

"We needed that ship, Octavian. We needed it badly. Zsinj has *Iron Fist*. Drommel has *Guardian*. Kaine has *Reaper*. And we, the *true* rulers of the Empire, do not have a single super star destroyer to secure our space. I sent you to Tralus in hopes of correcting that."

"With all due respect, Madam," Grant was saying, "The forces you gave me could never have bested either Grunger's or Pitta's fleet. If I had attempted to intervene, your ships would have been chewed up by both sides. I knew Grunger and Pitta both, Madam. I knew them personally, worked with them more than you ever did, and I knew for certain that if I tried to intervene, that slaughter over Tralus would have spread three ways and your soldiers would have taken the worst of it. As it is, I did not lose a single man under my command at Tralus and we still recovered enough ships to hold three whole sectors."

Isard stood there, staring at him, and Grant stared back until she turned and returned to the center of the chamber. She spun on one heel and turned to face Makati as though her exchange with Grant had never happened.

In truth, Makati couldn't blame her for being frustrated. *Aggressor* would have been an impressive prize, and they badly needed to shore up the fleet still loyal to Imperial Center. After Grand Admiral Syn's death at Kashyyyk, Isard had recalled the super star destroyer *Intimidator* along with the rest of the Black Sword Fleet stationed in the Koornacht Cluster. None of those ships, over twenty in all, had made it to Imperial Center. Isard seemed to think they'd been claimed by one of the Deep Core warlords, probably Blitzer Harrsk or Foga Brill, but all scouts sent into Koornacht had been destroyed.

There was also the massive destroyer *Vengeance*, which had been built for High Inquisitor Jerec. He was a Force-using troublemaker like Kadann, so Makati had long kept a close eye on him. The most recent intel reports placed Jerec and his flagship in the Sullust system. The High Inquisitor seemed to busy himself chasing ancient Jedi legends instead of conquering planets, which was just fine by Makati. It would make Jerec easier to deal with when the time came, and he hoped it would be soon.

And then there was *Whelm*, still moored at Anaxes. Coruscant's garrison world remained nominally loyal to Isard, but Admiral Kiez seemed particularly reluctant to loan out his prize warship. Most likely he was hedging his bets to see who really ended up as Palpatine's legitimate successor.

If anyone did at all.

"Afsheen," Isard said, "I have a new assignment for you."

He straightened his back and waited.

"Grunger and Pitta are dead, but there are still too many who defy our rule," she continued. "We need to establish Imperial Center's authority on planets that have broken away from us."

That could have meant worlds that had joined the rebels as well as ones who'd joined the warlords, but Makati knew she meant the latter. "Is there a specific target, Madam?"

"At the moment, I want to keep Zsinj on his toes. He's expanding territory too fast for my liking."

Zsinj was clever and ambitious; if reports were true he'd even started donning a white uniform and calling himself a grand admiral. He'd been hoping to go after Jerec, but he understood Isard's logic. She thought in terms of politics and strategy; she didn't know first-hand what a menace Force-users were. "Should I start planning an offensive, Madam?"

"Please do. My sources tell me he's currently struggling to assert control over Mandalorian space."

"Mandalorians are barbarians. They'll never be allies," Makati said. "Employees, for a time, but never allies."

"I'm aware, but they still create chaos we can exploit."

"I'll begin drawing up operational plans right away."

"Please do." She turned her gaze back to Grant. "As for you, Octavian, I have another task. I have been conducting

some communiques with Grand Moff Kaine,” she said. “I believe the time is right to conduct a more open dialog.”

Kaine was an interesting case, different from the other warlords. A governor, not an admiral, he’d elected to simply ignore commands from Imperial Center rather than pick a fight with it. In that he was like Kiez, but he also held a massive slice of the Outer Rim, with loyal Moffs controlling over a dozen sectors. He’d never sought to aggressively expand his territory; he’d pursued no major offensives, against either the rebels, the Empire, or Zsinj’s neighboring regime. There’d been talk that Kaine was holding back, waiting to throw his territory and resources behind whoever looked like Palpatine’s most worthy successor.

Grant’s eyebrows drew together; he was clearly having the same thought. “Has Kaine actually suggested reunification?”

“What he has suggested is an *alliance*. He has mentioned the sharing of nonmilitary resources and intelligence.”

“You think he could be helpful against Zsinj,” Makati said.

If he’d spoken out of turn, Isard didn’t mind. “It’s a possibility that needs to be investigated.”

Grant said, “If I may ask, Madam... why me?”

Isard smiled tightly. “Do you object, Octavian?”

“I’ll go where I’m sent, of course. But I’m not a diplomat.”

“No. You are an admiral who refuses to fight.”

“Madam, I-”

Isard held up a hand. “I want you to meet with Kaine at Ord Biniir. Talk to him, and come back with a recommendation on the most wise and prudent course of action.”

“As you wish.”

Her fire-and-ice gaze shifted back to Makati. “As for you, Afsheen, I want a preliminary campaign plan by the end of the day tomorrow. Understood?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Then get started. I have an Empire to rebuild. I can’t do it without my grand admirals.”

When you were one of the most recognizable women in the galaxy, that made it very hard to disappear.

She did her best, though. She knew about acting, and she knew about ways a human could change her appearance.

First, she'd chopped off the blond hair. Then she'd dyed it black. In the underlevels of Imperial City, where the sun only shined for an hour every day and all kinds of activity passed unnoticed in the shadows, it had been easy to buy filament contact lenses that not only changed her eye color but her retinal signature. She'd also been able to sell the expensive clothes on her back and use the credits to buy four other outfits, all of them baggy and unremarkable.

Life in the dark had a routine, just like life up in the towers. Every day, two hours before the brief midday light, she made her rounds through the market district in Zi-Kree Sector. Zi-Kree was predominantly inhabited by non-humans. On the one hand, it made her stand out more, but she was hardly the only one of her species in Zi-Kree, and aliens usually had a lot harder time telling individual human faces apart.

That morning (it still seemed like late evening to her) she was moving through the crowds, hunched forward a little so the hood of her cloak covered most of her face, but with her head tilted back enough that she could constantly scan the crowd. This was the place where Imperial City dumped its undesirables, and even ISB agents thought twice about wandering into this mess. Her second week here she'd been robbed at knife-point by some Gank thugs who had no idea who she was. She'd gladly given them all the credits in her pockets, but they'd been too stupid to search the inside lining of her tunic, where she kept her reserves.

Her parents, never rich, had taught her to always keep hard credits for emergencies. She'd kept that habit, even after becoming famous and wealthy, and when the time had come to run, she'd had enough presence of mind to grab her credit stash and make one last withdrawal from her bank account. Combined with the money made selling her jewelry, it had taken half a year to finally wear her credit stash down.

At this hour, petty crime was mostly limited to pick-pockets. She'd learned to keep everything in her hidden pouches when she went to the market, and hadn't had any problems. Today she went down familiar aisles, saw familiar faces working the stalls, selling familiar goods. Six months ago, when she'd first wandered down here, the whole scene

had seemed bewildering and exotic. It was weird how you got used to things.

She found her way to the stall bearing the sign: RUSTY'S ENDLESS ANTIQUES. True to advertising, dusty and battered relics from too many worlds to count were piled high on the counter and dangling from hooks in the ceiling. She made her way to the back of the stall, where the owner was waiting. The Baragwin, at least three times her size, turned his wrinkled gray face and looked down on her with glassy eyes.

"Good morning, Rusty," she said with a light smile. "How's business?"

The Baragwin leaned a little closer and blinked his eyes to focus. "I haven't seen you for... three days? Or is it four?"

"Four, I think. Did you miss me?"

"A little. A little." He turned his head and coughed; the whole stall seemed to shake,

When he looked back to her she asked, "Got any more scuttlebutt for me?"

"Scuttlebutt? Ah, there are always rumors. They say there was a fight over Corellia."

"Corellia? Really?" She stiffened. She'd been masking her native accent since going into hiding, pretending to be from Ralltiir instead. Accents were a skill she'd picked up early in her acting career and she was pretty sure she'd fooled Rusty, but Baragwin were a wandering race, famously good with languages and dialects.

"Oh yes, a big fight," Rusty's huge head nodded. "Two grand admirals killed, they said. Grunger and... Pitta."

How nice for them, she thought. "What about the Rebels? Any news about Luke Skywalker, or Rogue Squadron?"

Rusty took a moment to think. She tried to act naive, like a woman indulging a hopeless hero-worshiping crush on far-off warriors and usually peppered her inquiries about Wedge and Soontir with more innocuous ones, but Rusty was no fool. Finally, he said, "Nothing since Mindor. Sorry, dear."

No news was good news, or so she hoped. "Thanks, I just wanted to know. Think the Rebels might be up for another fight? Think they'll make a push to Coruscant, maybe?"

Rusty snorted and waved a claw dismissively. "Don't get your hopes up. I hear they've stalled out at Brentaal. Isard,

you know, she's determined not to lose any more Core worlds."

"Of course. Can't blame a girl for her dreams, can you?"

He shook his head. "It is better to be... realistic. I keep telling you but you never listen."

"I know. I did terrible in school too."

"Stay safe, dear."

"You too, Rusty. I'll see you around."

She waved goodbye and kept the disappointment from her face. Then she turned and walked back toward the dirty, crumbling tenement she called home. After making sure she wasn't followed, she climbed up the stairwell. The lifts in this building had gone out of service back when the Old Republic was around. When she reached her door she opened it with a simple stick of metal, shaped perfectly to match the locking mechanism on the door. She swung it open on hinges, stepped through the threshold, and bolted it closed behind her.

Her legs and back were aching. She slid down to the dirty floor and looked out at her room: one mattress in a corner, a pile of food, the door to the refresher unit. Through the windows, she could see the first brief stabs of daylight slanting across the sides of old buildings. She loved the short daylight and hated it too. It reminded her of how far she'd fallen.

Syal Antilles Fel had been on Imperial Center when she'd heard the news from Brentaal. The Imperial networks didn't announce that the rebels had captured the famous Baron Fel there; in fact, six months later, they still hadn't announced it. One of Soontir's cousins on Corellia had an ear inside Imperial intel channels, she didn't know how, and he'd been the one who'd told her to run.

She'd been getting ready to start shooting on her latest holo-drama when the news came down. Her last few talks with Soontir had left her distracted, and she'd put barely any effort into memorizing the script. When she'd first signed on the piece (months before Brentaal, when her husband was just starting to confide in his doubts about the direction the Empire was taking) she'd actually been excited. The story was different from her usual action pictures, weightier. She

was playing the wife of an Imperial war hero who, she discovered to her horror, was secretly leaking information to the Rebels. After two hours of soul-searching she would, of course, chose the Empire over love and turn him over to the authorities.

Even if she hadn't disappeared right before shooting, they'd have probably canceled the thing anyway.

Her first instinct had been to flee Coruscant, but all transit routes and from Brentaal were blocked. She had no idea where to go otherwise, and decided that trying to get onto an outbound ship was a bigger risk than staying put. She'd learned some information the Imperials kept suppressed, like that her husband and brother were now flying together for Rogue Squadron, but she had no idea how to contact whatever agents New Republic Intelligence had on Imperial Center, or anywhere else. She'd heard that, on taking power, Isard had aggressively purged suspected NRI agents in the capital. She'd acted in a good dozen espionage holo-dramas but they'd been nothing like the real thing.

So in the end, she was trapped.

Syal stayed where she was on the floor, back against the wall, one hand laid on her stomach. There was a blessing and a curse there. It got harder to get around around every day, and in two months she'd have to find a good doctor somewhere in this pit. At the same time, it was a built-in disguise. The whole galaxy was looking for Wynssa Starflare, but no one expected her to be seven months pregnant.

She hadn't even told Soontir. The only other person who knew was her personal doctor. She wouldn't be surprised if Isard's people had interrogated her, but the doc was a tough woman, and the Imps had no reason to suspect Syal was pregnant in the first place. She was confident her secret was safe. She had to believe it.

The sun came, the sun went, too fast as always. Syal finally stood up, back aching, and turn on the lights. She blinked against the sudden brightness and walked over to the refresher, cleaned, and got ready to eat.

She was in the middle of a bowl of rehydrated noodles when she heard a knock on the door. She froze, spoon in hand. The knock repeated. This happened from time to time;

sometimes beings prowled around the tenement begging. Other times they were looking for old residents to run some scam on. Once, though, it had been a pair of Ganks looking for empty apartments to rob, and she'd had to barricade the door to keep them out.

She strained to her feet. Before she could get to the door she heard a faint clanking sound. She froze, held her breath, and listened. It took a critical moment to realize someone was working the primitive metal lock attached to her door.

The thing swung open and two aliens charged into the room, holding up blaster pistols in two-handed grips: a flat-faced Duro and a gray-skinned Chev.

Syal threw her hands in the air. "Stop, stop! Don't shoot! I'll give you everything I have!"

The two aliens stared at her. Then they gave each other wordless glances. The Chev lowered his weapon and took two careful steps toward her. She wanted to run but she had no place to go.

The Chev walked a slow circle around her, looking her over, examining her face. She tried and failed to keep from trembling. He glanced at his partner and said, "I think we've got the package."

The Duro told her, "Your husband is Soontir Fel. The second time he took you to dinner, he gave you a Selonian chrysanthemum to wear."

It was true. She stared. The Duro stared back.

"We're with New Republic Intelligence," the Chev said. "And believe me, lady, you've been a big pain to find."

It was everything she'd been hoping for, and she couldn't allow herself to believe it. Isard could have found that out, somehow. Two non-humans would never be ISB agents but they could have been mercenaries.

"Prove it," she said stiffly.

The Duro shrugged. "What, you expect us to carry NRI cred on undercover ops? On Imperial Center?"

"Did my husband tell you to say that? About the flower?"

"He told General Cracken. Cracken told his agents. We've been scouring the galaxy for you, lady."

"And will you... take me to him?" Her voice trembled in hope. She couldn't help herself.

The agents looked at each other without answering her question.

"Where is he now? My husband."

The Chev said, "Last we heard, he was on *Home One*. Ackbar's flagship. With the rest of the Rogues."

The Duro wasn't lowering his blaster. Wherever he wanted to take her, it didn't seem like she had any choice but to go.

He must have seen the realization in her eyes. He said, "I don't want to stun a pregnant woman, but you're coming with us no matter what."

"Where?"

"A safehouse."

"Can you... talk to my husband from there?"

He shook his head. "Best we can do is pop out a coded message to our listeners on Brentaal. They'll get it to *Home One* from there. Then we wait for marching orders from Cracken."

She wasn't sure if she believed them, but in the end it didn't matter. Slowly, she lowered her hands.

The Chev looked around the room and asked, "Is there anything you want to take with you?"

"No," she said. "Just get me out of here."

Ysanne Isard had been gracious enough to provide a well-appointed penthouse for Grand Admiral Makati in Imperial City, just a short speeder ride away from the Palace. She'd done the same for Grant and Syn, as well as Takel before she'd decided to execute him instead. Apparently, she thought that pampering her top officers ensured their loyalty. It was a shallow, petty way of thinking, even a little insulting, but Makati supposed there was no harm by it either.

Still, he'd have rather been on his star destroyer *Steadfast* in orbit. The utilitarian simplicity of a warship cleared the mind and cut through all the dross that had been a hallmark of Imperial Center since the days when they'd called it Coruscant.

When he returned to his quarters from his audience with Isard, he found everything just as he'd left it. Even his protocol droid remained in the same corner of his study. When Makati turned the lights on, F-4GR's eyes lit up as

well, and the droid pivoted to greet his master. The glow of the overhead chandelier highlighted all the scratches, score marks, and dents on the old droid's silver chassis.

"Good evening, sir," F-4GR said.

"Good evening, Forger," Makati said he began to strip off his uniform jacket. "Anything unusual today?"

"There were no disturbances to report."

Makati was glad of that; one could never be sure any more. He knew he was a high-priority target, both for rebel operatives as well as agents for the breakaway warlords. And then there was Isard herself, but at least she usually made it clear who was on her bad side before trying to dispose of them. It had taken him a week to find all the bugs she'd planted in his quarters after moving in. F-4GR said there had been no intruders since then, and he trusted his droid.

And if there *had* been intruders, F-4GR was quite competent at dealing with them. He had a fold-out blaster pistol hidden inside his right arm-casing, a vibro-blade in his left. There was no outward sign of it; even Isard seemed to think his personal protocol droid was just a beaten-up relic passed down from his parents.

She wasn't wrong. She just didn't know the whole truth.

"Forger," he said, "Fetch me a drink, will you?"

"Is there anything in particular you'd like, sir?"

"I'll leave it to you."

"Very good, sir."

The droid executed as much of a bow as his stiff body could manage, then shuffled into the kitchen. Makati tossed his jacket onto the sofa and called up the main holo-projector. The chandelier dimmed and the open space in the middle of the study suddenly filled with a gleaming holographic map of the galaxy. Makati went over to the projector's controls, tastefully built into a hand-carved wooden desk by the window, and zoomed in on the swatches of space currently claimed by Warlord Zsinj.

The self-proclaimed grand admiral's little imperium stretched up the Hydian Way, beginning at Corsin and reaching almost all the way up to the Corporate Sector, though it fanned out far in either direction from the trade route. At points, it abutted the Ciutric Hegemony that Delak

Krennel had declared after murdering Pestage; at others, the Greater Maldrood oversector currently claimed by Treuten Teradoc. Teradoc was the more ambitious of the two, and Makati knew that if Zsinj looked vulnerable, Teradoc wouldn't hesitate to invade his territory.

The question, of course, was where to attack: where they stood the best chance of making gains, and where would hurt Zsinj the most. There were many valuable systems Coreward along the Hydian; going Rimward, the only place to expand was the Corporate Sector.

That small corner of the galaxy had been declared a free enterprise zone by Palpatine early in his term as Emperor; mega-corporations from all over the galaxy flocked there to ruthlessly exploit its natural resources. The Corporate Sector Authority had been allowed to operate largely outside of Imperial jurisdiction so long as it only exported to Imperial buyers and paid Palpatine a steady tribute tax. Makati had spent two years posted at Bonadan, its most populous planet, and one of the most polluted that was still able to support life. As its former Imperial Advisor he still had a number of connections within the CSA. He knew Zsinj had made polite overtures, but so far they'd been rebuffed, and he hadn't followed up with threats of force.

Makati allowed himself an indulgence and wondered whether Zsinj hadn't moved for the Corporate Sector yet because he knew a *real* grand admiral would defend it.

"Your drink, sir," F-4GR said, interrupting his thoughts. Makati turned to see his droid waiting patiently with a tray in his hands. Resting on it was a bottle of Cartao brandy, and one half-full glass.

Makati allowed himself a smile. "Do I seem homesick to you, Forger?"

"You seem pensive."

F-4GR had learned how to read his moods as well as any sentient, but it was to be expected. The droid had served Afsheen Makati since he was a boy, acting as a caretaker while his parents busied themselves with steering the course of Cartao's industry. That industry had been destroyed in the Clone Wars and so had his family's fortune, estate, and influence. Everything, it sometimes seemed, except F-4GR.

Makati picked up the glass of brandy and told F-4GR to put the tray on the desk. He took a sip and savored the strong familiar taste before swallowing.

"If I may intrude sir," F-4GR began, "It appears you are looking at Warlord Zsinj's territories."

"That's correct. I've been tasked to plan an offensive, Forger."

"I see, sir. Are you to retake space from Zsinj?"

"Not yet." He took another sip. "I believe Isard wants me to... keep his ambitions in check for now."

"I've heard he has plenty of those, sir."

"You mean ambitions?" Makati gave his droid a tried smile. "Where do you hear all of this, Forger?"

"I do sometimes browse intelligence reports while you're away, sir." His metal face didn't change, but Makati thought he heard a touch of embarrassment in his mechanical voice.

Makati chuckled and took another drink. He wandered into the middle of the holo and held out his free hand. Brilliant stars slipped between fingers and passed through his palm. "All right then, Forger, where would you recommend hitting Zsinj? Where would hurt him most and cost us least?"

The droid took a moment to compute. "Well, sir, I believe he is using Serenno as his base of operations, but that is deep in his territory. An attack there would be costly."

"I knew that. Somewhere along the Hydian, then? Somewhere on his Coreward frontier?"

"That would seem a better option. It would certainly be easier to move ships and supplies. You'd do well to check his advance toward Coruscant."

Makati waved a hand. "Zsinj doesn't want Coruscant. He's not like Grunger. No, he's going to stick with less... desirable real estate."

"Where there is less competition, you mean."

"Yes, exactly. He knows if he tries to bite too big a piece he'll choke on it." He stabbed a finger at a bright cluster of stars. "Director Isard believes these fellows might be useful."

"Mandalorians?" F-4GR sounded skeptical. "I would caution you against that, sir. The Mandalorian Protectors have been fighting with the Rebels against Imperial forces in multiple battles."

"Not Imperial," Makati said sternly. "Warlords. Cronal, Teradoc, Zsinj. The Mandalorians are mercenaries, even idealistic ones like Fenn Shysa. They can be bought, even if it's just for one job."

"Nonetheless, sir, I'd caution against it."

Makati turned away from Mandalorian Space and found the bright trail tracing the Hydian Way right in front of him. He looked at the glowing star systems running down the trade route: Corsin, Bandomeer, Botajef, Celanon, Serenno, all in Zsinj's hands.

"His foremost base is Corsin," he told his droid. "That's too obvious. But Bandomeer... *That* has potential."

"Bandomeer," F-4GR echoed. "Intersection of the Hydian Way and Braxant Run. No moons. Population is approx-"

Makati waved a hand. "I don't need the full database entry. The important thing is-"

"Massive ionite deposits," F-4GR finished.

"Exactly. That, plus a well-developed extant mining infrastructure, which means that whoever controls Bandomeer simply reaps the harvest."

"A tempting target, sir. Zsinj will fight hard for it."

"I know. I'll contact the Ubiquitorate for up-to-date intel on its defenses."

"You'll be fighting other Imperials, sir."

"No. Not Imperials." Makati waded out of the sea of stars toward his droid. "These warlords, Forger... They're vermin. Worse than the rebels. Almost as bad as Jedi."

"That is a... strong statement."

"And it's true. The Rebels are just a terrorist rabble. They want to tear this galaxy apart and don't pretend otherwise. You can say a lot about them, but at least they're honest. Men like Zsinj and Teradoc, they swore oaths. They promised to protect the Empire, protect this *galaxy* from anarchy. They betrayed their uniforms, even if they still have the audacity to wear them."

Cautiously, the droid said, "Some have raised objections to the legality of Director Isard's-"

"It doesn't matter. Whoever controls Imperial Center controls the Empire. I swore loyalty to Palpatine and I swore it to Pestage, even though he didn't deserve it. Isard may not

deserve it either, but that doesn't matter. Just like it doesn't matter if we're fighting the Rebels or the warlords or Force-using vermin like Jerec. They're all dangerous and they all have to be stopped. What matters, Forger, is *keeping the peace*. Nothing is more important than that."

He realized he'd almost started yelling. Makati sighed, straightened his uniform, and finished the rest of his brandy. He set the glass down on his desktop with a clank and didn't pour any more.

F-4GR turned his electronic eyes over to the holo and said, "At least Cartao seems to have avoided the fighting, sir. We should be thankful for that."

He was right. Cartao was still in Imperial hands, though the Rebels had taken nearby worlds. Nowadays, there was little reason they would want it. Everything valuable there had been destroyed in the Clone Wars, when a hoarde of Jedi ended up destroying its manufacturing districts rather than let the Separatists have it. When it was later revealed that the Jedi Council had manufactured the entire Clone Wars in order to overthrow Chancellor Palpatine, Makati hadn't been surprised at all.

That fact that the Rebels had embraced that disgusting cult was cause enough to throw everything into their defeat. The Rebels seemed not to realize that the Jedi respected no law but their mystic Force that supposedly imbued them not just with magic power but an all-consuming righteousness that justified whatever actions they did.

Under the Old Republic, their cult had turned itself into a parallel state that had worked to undermine the government from within; only an idiot would think history wouldn't repeat itself. Makati had never understood why Palpatine had gone so far as to exterminate the old Jedi Order, only to allow the likes of Vader, Kadann, and Jerec to continue feigning allegiance to anything but their twisted religion. Accountable to no one and imbued with powers that let them manipulate others, Force-users were an inherent menace to civilization.

Right now, regretfully, the warlords seemed to pose a bigger threat.

Makati allowed himself a sigh, and a twinge of self-pity, then said, "Forger, contact the Ubiquitorate right away. We have an invasion to plan."

Eventually she found out their names were Renb and Soveni. Renb was the Duro. He was the one who piped out the message to the NRI's offworld listening post. Soveni, the Chev, tried to make Syal comfortable. She took a shower, changed into fresh clothes, and ate the best meal she'd had in six months. It made her trust them, if only because ISB mercs would never be so polite.

The safehouse was located in the mid-levels, which meant they got a few more hours of sunlight on either side of noon. By the time she'd finished her meal, though, the sun had gone down and all the artificial lights of Imperial City had turned up. Soveni showed her to a private sleeping room, where a clean bed and mattress awaited her. When she lay down and buried her face in the pillow, she breathed in the best scent she'd known in months.

It was dark and quiet in her room that night, but she couldn't sleep. As she lay face-up on the mattress, one hand on the swell of her stomach she felt restless, despite all she'd been through that day. She'd spent so long on the run, reluctant to trust anyone, that she couldn't bring herself to totally accept Renb and Soveni's care. If they *were* ISB agents, they would have surely handed her over to Isard by now, but they might have been something else. Bounty hunters, maybe, though how they'd have known about Soontir's chrysanthemum, she had no idea.

She sat upright on the bed, then started to pace the small room back and forth. It was paranoia, really. She wanted to be safe, to let these NRI agents take care of her, if that's what they were. There was no logical reason to be this edgy.

Some time, late into the night, she left her bedroom to get a glass of water. She stepped barefoot down the clean hallway floor, but before she got to the refresher she heard voices. She froze, back against the wall, and listened to Renb and Soveni as they talked in the dark dining room.

"I don't like waiting," Soveni was saying. "The longer we wait, the more likely trouble finds us."

“Cracken says we wait. So we wait.”

“Why, though?”

“Message didn’t say.”

“I know, but think about it. Why?”

After a pause, Renb suggested, “Maybe they’re having problems with the husband.”

“They doubt his loyalty, you mean?”

“I don’t know. Do I look like Cracken?”

“No. Not enough hair.” Soveni gave a shallow sigh.

“We’ve got false idents for all three of us. We could grab a freighter if we had to.”

“Slipping out of Imp space wouldn’t be easy, not on a commerical hauler. Isard’s not letting any civilian ships pass into Republic territory. We’d have to slip into warlord space, then swing around. I’d much rather have our own ship. My bet is, Cracken’s putting together a retrieval team.”

“He’d better be.” After a long pause, the Chev asked, “What do we tell her?”

“Tell her be patient. Help’s on the way. You now, all that.”

There was another pause, even longer. Soveni said, “I wasn’t expecting her to be kriffing pregnant. How long does that last for humans?”

“How should I know? Do I look like a beady-eyed pinkskin?”

“Well. We can ask her tomorrow. Figure out what she needs.”

“We can’t let her out of this building.”

“I know.”

“She won’t like it.”

“I know.”

There was another pause. Finally, Soveni said, “I need some kriffing sleep.”

“Go ahead. I’ll keep first watch.”

Soveni must have pushed his chair away from the table, because its feet screeched across the kitchen floor. By that point, though, Syal was already back at her room, and the sound of her door hissing shut was muted by the sound of footsteps down the hall.

Strangely enough, eavesdropping helped her sleep that night. She still had more questions the answers, but at least

she could be confident she wasn't going to end up in Isard's clutches.

The next morning, though, they didn't tell her about Cracken's message. Soveni just smiled and told her they were still waiting, then politely asked her about human pregnancies. She explained, and they listened, and that was that. When she was done, nobody had anything more to say. The room felt awkward, claustrophobic.

At least it was clean, she thought. At least there was light. At least they were safe.

They had a HoloNet transceiver hooked up, so she spent most of the afternoon watching ISB-regulated news broadcasts that never said anything worthwhile. Renb slipped out, supposedly to pick up food, but she barely noticed. After a couple hours of bland propaganda, she shut the transceiver off. She heard noise from the kitchen and walked down to see Renb and Soveni standing over a bag of food.

"We might be hunkering down here for a while," Soveni told her, "So we thought we should stock up."

"How long?" she asked politely. "Did you hear anything from Cracken yet?"

"Not yet," Soveni shook his head.

"We'll let you know," Renb said.

Keeping a bland, earnest-looking smile on her face, she said, "Okay. Thanks. I just hope it won't be too much longer."

"Don't worry," Soveni said. "I think that-"

"Wait." Renb held up a hand.

"What?"

"Sssh."

Syal froze and listened. They all did. She heard a creak from down the hall, by her bedroom. She turned and looked, but saw only a closed door at the far end. Then there was another creak, and another. Then nothing.

Renb reached into his vest. A hold-out pistol appeared in his long-fingered hand. He stepped slowly down the hall.

The door popped open without warning. A last blast lanced out and took Renb in the shoulder. The Duro reared up and fired back, catching his assailant dead in the chest. The man pitched forward and crashed onto the floor.

"Oh, *stang*," Syal hissed. "They found us. They-"

Soveni slapped a hand over her mouth and pulled out a pistol with his other one. Renb's flat green face contorted with pain as he slumped against the table, still clutching the pistol with his good hand. Between his heavy breathing and the pounding of blood in her ears, Syal could hear nothing else.

Then she heard the front door scrape open. Soveni took his hand off her mouth and ducked ahead of Renb. He spun on one heel to face the doorway and pumped out three shots. Syal couldn't see the doorway from where she stood but she heard a groan, and another body falling.

Soveni stayed where he was, pistol clasped in both hands and pointed at the doorway. He stayed like that, frozen for almost a minute, before he turned to face Syal and Renb.

"We need to get out of here," he whispered. "Back door. If they haven't got the speeder-"

A blaster sounded behind him. Soveni tumbled forward, smoke trailing from between his shoulders. Renb snapped his gun up and fired over his partner's body, nailing the second attacker from the bedroom. The man caught two shots in the chest and fell right beside his partner.

Renb dropped his pistol to his side and, wincing, said, "Like he said, out the back."

"But the speeder-"

"We don't know how many they have, but-"

Pounding feet burst through the front door. At the same time, the back door burst open. Syal ducked and lurched for Soveni's pistol, lying just past his outstretched hand. Laser blasts sounded over her head. She scooped up Soveni's pistol and, squatting awkwardly, angled it upward. She stared up at a bland middle-aged human in black, just a meter away. He stared at her, eyes wide in recognition. His thumb flicked the switch on the side of his pistol, changing from *kill* to *stun*. It took less than a second but it cost him his life. Syal's gun went off in her hand, catching him dead in the chest. He fell back and collapsed on top of his friend.

Then everything went still. Everything was silent. Syal awkwardly rose from her crouch and looked around. Two dead ISB agents in the main doorway, two more at the door

to her bedroom, where they must have cut through the windows. Another was on the kitchen floor, blaster-hole still smoking and fresh in the middle of his forehead.

As for Renb and Soveni, they were both dead.

Syal didn't know how long she stood there. She only came to her senses when the pistol fell from her shaking hand and clattered on the floor next to Soveni's corpse. She hugged herself tight, fingers clawing into her arms, and all she could think of that was this wasn't right. She'd played in dozens of action holo-dramas, staged so many gunfights they'd felt routine. She'd fired stunt-weapons countless times, and Soontir had taken her to live-fire ranges more than once, but she'd never used one like this. Never on a person. And in all those staged fights there'd never been the reek of blaster-smoke and burnt flesh. She'd never had seven bodies slowly cooling around her.

Gradually, she realized that nobody else was coming. She forced herself to breath regularly, and consigned herself to the grisly, necessary task of searching bodies.

On Soveni, she found the fake identicard he'd mentioned the night before. *Reina Auveron*, it called her. Renb had a few extra credit chips. They both had guns, of course, small but lethal. She pocketed both. As for the Imperials, she searched each one and found very little, except for the one Renb had killed in the kitchen. He had a comlink with him and some kind of silver-framed identicard with an ISB logo faintly etched in the bottom corner. She didn't know what to do with it, but she pocketed that too. It might come in handy.

When she'd gotten everything, she cautiously peeked out the back door. There were no ISB agents lurking any more, just the airspeeder Renb and Soveni had flown her on the day before.

It was a common model, but the ISB agents might have reported the serial number to headquarters. She could risk taking it, but not far.

That was all right with her. One ride to the spaceport outskirts was all she needed. Isard knew she was on Coruscant and that meant she had to run. She didn't know where, but it didn't matter. She had to run.

CHAPTER FIVE **LWHEKK**

The formal surrender ceremony, such as it was, took place on the battle-scarred plaza outside the *Cree'n'ak* palace. Captain Niriz accompanied Thrawn down to the planet's surface, where their shuttle folded its wings and sat down next to the sleek delta-shaped transport from the CEDF flagship. The white-armored 501st stormtroopers formed ranks on one side of the plaza; on the other, Chiss infantry stood in their black uniforms. A small handful of blue- and red-scaled Ssi-ruuk stood in a cluster in front of the wreckage-strewn entrance to the crystal palace, while packs of small brown-skinned P'w'eck watched from behind them.

It was a stunning and historic sight, but all Niriz could think of as he stepped onto Lwhekk's surface and breathed its air was how terrible it smelled. He could barely keep his face from wrenching.

Praying he would get used to the stench, along with the miserable muggy heat, he tried to focus his attention on the scene before him. Thrawn stood at the base of his shuttle's landing ramp, eyes locked across the distance with those of the black-robed leader of the Chiss delegation.

To Niriz's surprise, she was the one to close the distance. Two bodyguards stayed close behind her as she began walking toward Thrawn. The Grand Admiral remained where he was. Niriz tensed and let his hand fall to the service pistol at his belt. He knew that if these Chiss tried anything the 501st would spring into action. The only result would be a bloodbath, and the Chiss were not stupid enough for that.

Still, he kept his palm on the butt of his sidearm.

The woman gestured for her escorts to stay out of earshot, then closed the distance with Thrawn. She stood before him but did not offer hand her to shake. Niriz didn't know what that meant; he didn't even know if Chiss normally shook hands in greeting.

His gut, though, told him it was a bad start.

"Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo," Thrawn said. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"It's been a very long time," the Aristocra said evenly. "But we knew it would happen eventually."

Like Thrawn, she spoke in her native Cheunh. Niriz had taken efforts to learn the tongue from Thrawn over the past four years, but the aristocra didn't know that. She didn't deign to recognize his presence at all.

"I was glad to take part in the conquest of Lhwekk," Thrawn said.

The aristocra raised an eyebrow. "Do you intend to add Ssi-ruuvi space into your... empire?"

"The proection of Chiss space has always been important to me. I merely wanted to assist to Ascendancy in eliminating a threat. Do you wish to add it to yours?"

She shook her head. "We have no colonial ambitions for this world. We were, as you said, eliminating a threat." She paused, then added, "They attacked us without provocation. We responded properly."

"I did not deny that," Thrawn said, but Niriz could hear the tension in his voice. The Ascendancy's strict policy against pre-emptive strikes, originally created as a way to maintain its isolation, had evolved into a dogma among the Chiss. For disobeying that dogma, Thrawn had been exiled.

The grand admiral glanced at the waiting cluster of Ssi-ruuk and asked, "What do you plan to do with them?"

"This expedition was primarily punitive. We do not intend to govern this world for them."

"Still, you will be dictating terms of surrender."

After a moment's thought, she said, "We'll dismantle their navy, of course, though most of that work has been done already."

"Will you strip them of space travel?"

"They are a clever race, if savage. They will rebuild no matter what. But we will make sure they will not threaten the Ascendancy for a very long time."

"I understand this victory was made possible in part because of the P'w'eck."

"Their slave race? Yes, I read the report from your soldiers. The ones in the palace killed the Shreeftut and most of their Council of Elders."

"After that, their admiral of the fleet sued for peace. We are in their debt. Once you leave them to their own devices, there will be reprisals. If the P'w'eck and Ssi-ruuk fall on each other, we both know the latter will win and the former will be slaughtered."

"That is not our concern. If you want to take it upon yourself to prevent more bloodshed, you are welcome to the trouble."

"I will... consider it."

The aristocra looked back at him. "We know what you have been doing, Mitth'raw'nuruodo. We know about the private empire you've based at Nirauan, and about your... service to Palpatine."

"Palpatine is dead," Thrawn said evenly.

"And will you claim his throne, Mitth'raw'nuruodo?" She took a step closer, examined his face. "Isn't that what you've always wanted? To bring... *order* to all the alien worlds?"

"I have other business I must attend to."

"Your Nuso Esva? We've heard of him too."

"You are fortunate he hasn't bothered with the Ascendancy yet."

"He knows what will happen if he tries." She gestured to the beaten Ssi-ruuk.

One of the red-scaled Ssi-ruuk began to wail in his fluting language. Niriz watched as an old Chiss in battered gray robes was pushed out from the pack of aliens. Stepping toward Thrawn and the aristocra, he spread his hands and said in Cheunh, "Admiral Ivpikkis is impatient. He wishes to begin negotiations."

The aristocra stiffened in surprise. "What is your name, citizen?"

The old Chiss bowed low. "I am Attic'laspar'inrokini."

"You are a prisoner?" For the first time, Niriz heard sympathy in her voice.

"They captured my family on Csaus," he said.

"And your family?"

"Entenched, madam." The slave straightened. "They spared me. I was a musician, you see. Their language, it was... easier for me to learn."

Niriz glanced at Thrawn. The grand admiral's face was unreadable.

"We will find whatever family you have left, Attic' laspar'inrokini," the aristocra's voice wavered. "I am very sorry what what happened to you."

"Don't worry yourself, on my account," the slave said, almost apologetically. "The Ssi-ruuk... They're actually not so bad... When you get to know them..."

He lowered his head and waved them forward. Thrawn and the aristocra followed; Niriz remained where he was beneath the shuttle, a feeling of deep pity in his chest. He could see the same emotion on the aristocra's face. He couldn't see it, but he knew the grand admiral felt it too.

Between the smell, the heat, the humidity, and the memory of a messy fight, Daric LaRone couldn't figure out part of Lwhekk he was gladdest to be rid of. After all the 501st had shipped back up to *Grey Wolf* and gotten a chance to shower and see the medic, they had nothing to do except wait for the grand admiral to finish his business dirtside. Since there was time to kill, he posed the question to the other four formers members of the fugitive stormtrooper unit they'd once called, perhaps a little overdramatically, the Hand of Judgment.

"Definitely the smell," said Taxtro Grave as gnawed at a Baldavian chew-stick. "What was that anyway? Pollution? Something mixed in with the oxygen? Or is it the lizards themselves that smell bad?"

"I'm gonna guess all three," Joak Quiller said as he poured his cup of caf and sat down at the ready-room table with the others.

"It was heat for me," Saberan Marcross volunteered. "The way I was sweating in my armor, it made the air down there smell good."

"I gotta go with heat too," said Korlo Brightwater. "Those Broadsword tanks, they pack a punch, but they really should have been built with better climate control."

"Well, we can mod the tanks, just like we tweak everything else around here," Quiller took a sip from his cup. "Just go the grand admiral and say you *really* want to feel cozy when you're fighting. You can ask for some throw pillows while you're at it."

"Well, what about you, flyboy?"

"What's there to say? I was in the drop ship the whole time. And you all know those birds have climate control. They have to, since they're vacuum fliers. No heat for me and no smell either."

He sat back, grinning. Brightwater booed and Grave threw a chew stick at him.

"You lose any birds?" LaRone asked.

"Not a one. Helps when they have no anti-air defenses."

LaRone allowed a sigh and looked at the others. "What kind of losses did your squads take?"

The mood felt suddenly serious. It was a stupid question to ask, but it had been on his mind the whole time.

"Only lost two snipers," Grave said. "The Ssi-ruuk, they were busy with infantry."

"Didn't lose any tanks at all," said Brightwater, almost apologetic.

LaRone and Marcross shared look heavy with sympathy. Marcross said, "We lost thirteen. A couple more are in sick bay, but they should make it."

"Nine for us," said LaRone. He was ashamed how Marcross' losses made him feel a little better.

Cautiously, Brightwater asked, "Was it mostly the new ones you lost?"

Marcross nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "Casualties mostly came from militias that helped us hold off Nuso Esva. They weren't professional soldiers."

"They were five-oh-first," LaRone said defensively.

"You know what I mean. Balkin and the others, the ones with actual Imperial training, they all came through fine. The irregulars, the ones from local anti-Nuso Esva militias, they learned to fight very differently than we did."

“Well,” Grave said, “Maybe you’ll have time to train more infantry now. We took care of the Ssi-ruuk and Nuso Esva’s probably licking his wounds someplace. Maybe we’ll get a breather.”

“How likely do you think *that* is?” Marcross asked.

They didn’t have to answer. Since joining Thrawn four years back they’d been whisked from one end of the Unknown Regions to another, fighting strange aliens none of them had even heard of back when they’d been simple stormtroopers aboard the *Reprisal*. Sometimes, just sometimes, LaRone allowed himself to wonder what would have happened if they’d never been hounded by that ISB grunt, if he’d never been forced to shoot the bastard and take his whole squad on the run.

Of course, given the news they’d been getting about the sad state of the Empire, it was safe to say life back in the known galaxy wouldn’t have ended up simple either.

LaRone sighed. Marcross joined him. Brightwater reached across the table and took a chew-stick from Grave’s bowl. As he gnawed on it he said, “You know what I miss?”

“What?” asked Grave.

“When it was just the five of us. Not back on *Reprisal*, but after that. When we were on the run.”

Marcross cocked an eyebrow. “When we were looking over our shoulders all the time, scared ISB would catch up?”

“Yeah, there was that, but we were *free*, weren’t we? We were out there, righting wrongs, stamping out corruption, all that good stuff. All on our own terms.”

“We were only responsible for ourselves,” LaRone said. And Brightwater was right. Those had been good days, even if it hadn’t felt like it at the time. They did important work now, of course, more important than they’d ever done when they’d been riding solo. They also had to lead younger men into battle and count the bodies afterward, and he was more than sick of that.

When they’d signed on with Thrawn, he’d promised their roles would be focused on training instead of fighting. They’d all been ready for a slower life and had eagerly accepted, but the Unknown Regions and all its shadowy threats didn’t let life stay slow for long.

"I've only got one regret," Quiller said seriously, and held up a finger.

"Let's hear it," said Grave.

"What I really regret is that I missed four years' worth of Wynssa Starflare holo-dramas."

Grave threw another chew-stick at him.

"What? You're trying to tell me she'd *not* the most objectively gorgeous actress of our generation?"

"I was actually a Javul Charn man," Brightwater said. "And isn't Starflare married to what's's'face? That pilot?"

"Baron Fel," Grave said. "Sorry, Joak, I don't think she's gonna ditch the Empire's biggest hero flyboy for a sad sack like you."

"Yeah," added Brightwater, "You can't even hold a steady job."

"C'mon, let a man dream."

"Fine, dream all you want. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"I don't think they're *those* kinda dreams," Grave stage-whispered in Brightwater's ear.

Quiller grabbed a chew-stick and threw it at him. Brightwater laughed. Against themselves, Marcross and LaRone laughed too.

Quiller tipped back in his chair, stretched out his arms, and yawned. "Oh, fierfek. That caf's not doing the trick."

"Want more?" Brightwater glanced at the pot on the counter.

Quiller waved a hand. "No. I think sleep'll cure what ails me. Thanks for the conversation, gentlemen. Let's do this again sometime."

With visible effort, Quiller pushed himself out of his chair and walked for the door, leaving his cup of caf cooling on the table.

"Sweet dreams," Brightwater called as the door closed behind him.

Grave chuckled to himself and picked up another chew-stick. As it bobbed at the corner of his mouth he told Marcross and LaRone, "You two are a veritable party, you know that?"

"Sorry," Larone sighed.

"You don't have to apologize, boss," Brightwater said.

"I'm not your boss any more," LaRone shook his head. "Anyway, I'm tired too. Think I might hit the barracks."

"Have fun. Try to ignore any weird nosies or smells that might be coming from Quiller's bunk."

LaRone gave a dry, obligatory laugh and made for the exit. The fight had left his body almost as sore as his mood. He hoped some good sleep might help. It probably would in the short term, but he figured that sooner or later, he'd end up in the same place again.

When he returned to *Grey Wolf*, Captain Niriz took a deep, deep breath, and savored the bland recycled air. After that, he followed Thrawn up to the conference room, where Voss Parck was waiting for them.

"The Ascendancy forces will be pulling out within a few days," Thrawn began as he sat at the head of the oblong table. Beyond the viewport, they could see the tangled debris that drifted in Lwhekk's orbit. "Once all people and material are accounted for, and their ships are repaired."

"And what happens to all of this?" Parck gestured at the planet.

"State-building has never been the Ascendancy's concern," Thrawn said flatly. "The Ssi-ruuvi threat has been eliminated. That is what matters to them."

"What about the P'w'eck?" Niriz asked. "On the planet, you talked as though there might be reprisals for what the Shreeftut's slaves did."

"From what I've heard," Parck grunted, "Death would be a mercy for most of them."

Seriously, Thrawn said, "Aristoca Veeren seems intent on letting the survivors sort this situation out. I believe we have a responsibility to make sure Lwhekk remains stable."

Parck frowned. "Sir, I have to remind you that our resources are limited. We don't have what it takes to state-build either. We may have beaten Nuso Esva back, but he's still out there."

"I'm well aware of that, Captain," Thrawn said, betraying only minor irritation at the warlord's name. "However, I believe we can lay groundwork for a stable government here

on Lwhekk which should prevent any excess bloodshed for the time being.”

“How would we do that?” asked Niriz.

“By preserving the ectant power structure, with some sensible modiciations. I was able to have some enlightening discussion with Admiral Ivpikkis. He is, in fact, quite reasonable in his way.” Seeing Niriz’s frown, he added, “Ivpikkis followed the Shreeftut’s orders, but he never agreed with the policies. He predicted a wave of military expansion would bring down disaster for them.”

“He was right,” Parck crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you trust Ivpikkis to rebuild?”

“He will be a useful component, yes. Captain Parck, my staff is preparing a thorough review of current Ssi-ruuvi politics for you to review.

“Me?” the captain blanched.

“Yes. I would like you to remain here with *Admonitor* for the next month to help solidify the political situation here. A coalition government will have to be created, one which guarantees the safety of the P’w’eck and, if possible, a voice for them.”

“That sounds very... complicated.” Parck said, still frowning.

“Statecraft is always complicated, but as I said, there as reasonable beings you can work with.”

Niriz still couldn’t picture those ferocious, fanatic lizards as reasonable, but there wasn’t any arguing with Thrawn. Parck, though, said, “A month can be a very long time. What if Nuso Esva launches another offensive?”

“Then you withdraw from Lwhekk immediately and deal with him,” Thrawn said darkly. “As it is, give it the allotted time, then fall back to Nirauan. Hopefully Captain Niriz and I will be finished with our mission by then.”

“What mission is that, sir?” asked Niriz.

Thrawn shifted his glowing red gaze to the younger captain. “We’ll be taking *Grey Wolf* into the Core. *Corvus* as well.”

“You mean... Imperial territory?”

“You have a problem with that, Captain?” A tiny, wry smile tugged Thrawn’s lips.

The idea of going home felt strange, because it wasn't home any more. In four short years, the mysteries of uncharted space had become the place where he belonged. He tried to muster the desire to see Imperial City's brilliant skyline again, but it wouldn't come.

"What will you be doing in the Core?" asked Parck.

"Diplomacy," Thrawn said, "And recruitment."

It was clear he wasn't going to tell them more than that. Niriz had learned long ago that the grand admiral liked to hold onto critical information until it was need-to-know.

"Are you certain you need an entire star destroyer for that?" Parck pressed. He was clearly unhappy with his assignment, and unlike Niriz, he'd grown comfortable with expressing occasional displeasure with his orders.

"In the interests of security, yes."

Niriz thought it a good enough answer. He wasn't sure if the Rebels knew about Thrawn, but if they did, they'd be on the lookout for him. Isard and all the scattered warlords weren't trustworthy either.

"What about the Five-Hundred-and-First?" asked Parck. "They'd be very useful in pacifying Lwhekk."

"Lwhekk is already pacified. Your job is to make sure it stays that way," Thrawn said, warningly. "But yes, I don't believe I'll have need of the Five-Hundred-First for this mission, barring a few select officers."

"Which officers?" Niriz asked.

"The ones formerly called the Hand of Judgment."

Daric LaRone and his fellow stormtroopers had been integral in shaping Thrawn's 501st into a capable fighting unit. The unit would still function, and function well, but without its top officers it wouldn't be the same.

Parck was still frowning, but like Niriz, he knew when not to argue. He said, "We'll make do, Admiral."

"I'm sure you will," Thrawn clasped white-gloved hands in his lap. "You may return to *Admonitor*, Captain. When I see you again, I expect we'll have a prize that will put all your fears to rest."

CHAPTER SIX **BOUDOLAYZ**

“Target’s coming up,” Feylis said.

Everything about her was tense: her voice, her posture as she sat in the pilot’s seat, the stiff way she gripped the shuttle’s control yoke. Despite the edginess, Dey’rylan thought she looked very fittingly *Imperial*. Her black Intel uniform contrasted starkly with her pale skin and her gold hair was bound up in a tight military bun that stuck out beneath the back of her black cap.

Dey’rylan leaned in close over her shoulder and said, “Are your flyboys standing by?”

Feylis glanced at the scanner and nodded. “They’re set to drop out of hyperspace sixteen seconds after we do.”

“Then it’s all going according to plan,” Dey’rylan gave her shoulder a squeeze.

She didn’t look assured. He didn’t blame her. There were a lot of ways this op could go wrong and only one way it could go right.

He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of his people. They were all crammed into the shuttle’s compact hold: Kasck Fre’leir was dressed in a dirtied tunic, just like Dey’rylan himself. His russet fur was messy and patched with dried blood. Next to Kasck there was Devin Torr in a black Imp uniform, just like Feylis. Torr was the only one of them who had ever actually been in Imperial service, and he still knew how to look the part, with the short-cut brown hair, the proud square chin, the way he gave his head a haughty tilt so he was always literally looking down on you. He was originally

from a rich family on Esseles, so he played aristocratic disdain well.

Rounding it out were Jekk Karr and Sho-tev Ekrhine, both already faceless in their stormtrooper armor. Ekrhine was a hefty Em'liy, and they were lucky to have a suit he could squeeze into without giving himself away. Like the shuttle, their ident codes, and the specs for Boudolayz orbital station, the stormie outfits had been provided by recent defectors. Even with the offensive in the Core ground to a halt, they were still getting a lot of them, which Dey'rylan could only take as encouragement.

"Start transmitting the distress call right when we exit hyperspace," Dey'rylan told Feylis. "Don't wait for the Rogues to show up."

"I know."

"And when we get inside, stay with the shuttle. Keep the engines warm."

"I know."

"And if they send techs out to help—"

"Chase 'em away. I know. I'll tell them I've got an unstable fuel line, could blow."

Dey'rylan nodded. She'd be okay. That meant the tricky part was on his people's shoulders.

"Thirty seconds," Feylis said, and reached out to grab the lever that controlled the hyperdrives.

"Let's get this started, then," Jekk said.

He slapped a pair of stun cuffs on Kasck's shoulders and locked them, in case any of the base security wanted to check. Dey'rylan held out his wrists to Jekk could do the same to him. As those cold metal restraints snapped tight, Feylis pulled her lever down.

The light-show of hyperspace disappeared and planet swelled up before them. With his naked eye, Dey'rylan could see the Ubiqtorate station in orbit, silhouetted against Boudolayz's rusty-brown surface. He didn't see the *Carrack*-class light cruiser that was supposed to be around here and hoped it was on the far side of the planet.

He'd just taken stock of the situation when Feylis threw the shuttle into a dizzying corkscrew. Red laser blasts whipped

past their cockpit; one volley shuddered against their deflector shields.

"Showtime," she said.

"Remember, Rogues, we're here to lose this fight," Wedge told them as they plunged after the shuttle.

Tycho Celchu nodded to himself as he kicked his X-wing forward. He and Avan were the foremost flight, which meant they were in charge of making this whole charade seem convincing.

Feylis was doing a good job on her part. She was flying that little shuttle like it was an X-wing, sending it into all kinds of spins and dips and curves to avoid the lasers Tycho and Avan were throwing at it.

"Look alive," Janson said, "We've got four eyeballs headed our way."

It must have been the TIE patrol flying cap. According to Cracken's intel, there was supposed to be one full squad of TIEs roosting at the station, plus another aboard the light cruiser that was supposed to be around. It wasn't showing up on Tycho's scanners right now, which meant they were lucky. Hopefully.

"Three flight, four flight, break off to intercept," Wedge said. On his order, Janson, Hobbie, Nrין, and Fel peeled away from Feylis. Wedge and Xarccе kicked their fighters ahead to spew some mis-aimed laser blasts at Feylis' shuttle.

"The station's not dropping shields," Avan said.

"They'll drop 'em," Tycho said. "Gotta help fellow Imps in distress."

"They might be waiting for a code."

"They've got a code."

"But the code might—"

"Can it, Rogue Four," Wedge snapped.

Avan didn't apologize. His fighter slowed slightly and Tycho took the opportunity to skim a few shots off the shuttle's aft shields, enough to make this ruse look authentic without breaking the ship.

"Shields are down!" Avan cried.

Feylis' shuttle kicked forward at full speed. The station only had a few turbolaser cannons for defense, but they

turned to spray bright green covering fire at the pursuing X-wings. The four pilots peeled off, letting Feylis and company plunged into the mouth of the station's landing bay.

"That Carrack cruiser is coming around the planet," Soontir Fel reported. "Twelve fighters deployed and incoming."

"Understood," Wedge said. "All flights, let's take the fight to them. Time to take the show to Act Two."

After two years and four months as commanding officer aboard Boudolayz Orbital Station (usually referred to as 'the Boss' by its staff), Commander Heimon Drayk could say with some authority that guarding a critical Ubiqtorate data storage facility was not nearly as exciting as it sounded.

In the time he'd been here, the Rebels had blown up the Emperor and Vader, killed a lot of admirals (grand or otherwise), taken key Core worlds, and generally mucked up the whole galaxy, but they'd never bothered to attack Boudolayz. Granted, the Ubiqtorate tried to keep its base locations classified, but if the Rebels could locate the Emperor's secret weapon they could easily find a data-dump facility.

Before Endor they'd had a strike cruiser guarding this station too, but Isard had pulled it back to the Core, apparently to defend more important or more threatened locations. He'd felt vaguely insulted by the whole thing.

So, when a shuttle dropped out of hyperspace with eight X-wings on its tail, Drayk had felt unabashedly excited.

He'd ordered the Carrack cruiser on orbital patrol to come back at once, then called for the TIEs flying cap to intercept. Eight X-wings wasn't a lethal fleet, but without fighter support this station was going to need help.

As the *Mu*-class shuttle bobbed and weaved around enemy fire, Drayk wanted to drop hangar bay shields and usher it to safety right there, but he halted himself, because in the back of his mind he knew this could be some kind of trick by the Rebels. But then it started transmitting a clearance code, old but still active, and Drayk ordered the shield down.

He had no idea why this shuttle was being pursued by the enemy, but he left the command deck and half-sprinted down to the hangar to find out.

By the time he got down there, the flight chief was already at the shuttle's open doors. A tall man in a black uniform came out first; behind him, two stormtroopers pushed a pair of scraggly Bothan captives down the landing ramp and onto the flight deck.

Shouldering past the deck chief, he said, "I am Commander Drayk, head officer on this station."

"Thank you for your help, Commander," the officer said without giving his name. It would have been unusual in most places, but on the Boss, Drayk got a lot of visitors carrying secrets.

The officer kept marching away from the shuttle, stormtroopers and prisoners behind him. As Drayk awkwardly backstepped, the officer explained, "I'm sorry, but we have damage to one of our fuel lines. I want to get clear."

"You mean it might explode?"

"Our pilot's back there now, locking things down. Give her a minute. It should be all right."

Drayk looked over the officer's shoulder, saw a blond-haired woman in the hatch. "I can send our techs to help."

The officer gave him a glare that forbade that. Drayk was used to getting it from haughty Ubiquitorate officials, including the one who'd dropped by two standard says ago to give their database a complete update. He still didn't like it.

He glanced at the Bothans. "We weren't scheduled to receive prisoners today."

"We were supposed to drop them at Exodeen, but we picked up a rebel tail."

"Our fighters are handling them now," Drayk assured. Two TIE squads, plus the Carrack, would be able to handle eight X-wings, though he didn't want to think about how much attrition that would require.

"These Bothans are valuable. Can we take them to a holding cell for the time being?"

"Yes, of course. I'll show you the way."

Determined to make a good showing, Drayk began leading the group through the station's hallways. He'd dealt with enough Ubiquitorate officials to know that they'd never give him any thanks for his efforts, but anything less might get him on their bad side, and that was a terrible place to be.

They were halfway to the detention block when the entire station shuddered. Drayk bit back a curse and fetched his comlink.

“Command level, report. Are the X-wings back?”

“Two of them have started strafing runs on the station, sir,” came the reply.

“What about the fighters?”

“Our squads are trying to handle them now, sir. They seem to be shying away from a head-on engagement.”

They were outmatched and knew it. Rebels weren’t half as brave as people said. He was surprised they hadn’t fled the system. “Recall a flight to take out those two X-wings.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Drayk switched off his comlink, put on his best confident face, and turned back to the visitors. “The situation is well under control. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I’m sure we don’t,” the intel officer said, “But please, I’d like to hurry.”

Drayk did just that, walking as fast as he could without actually running. He led them through a pair of blast doors and into a sensor node where two auxiliary officers were at their consoles.

He glanced back at the Ubiquitorate officer as he stepped inside. “From here, we can take you down to the detention level.”

As the blast doors closed behind the prisoners, the officer looked around and asked, “These computer nodes, are they fully accessible?”

“Excuse me?” Drayk frowned.

“Can they access the station’s main database?”

“Well, yes, but-”

Suddenly he was choking. Some tight cable was drawn round his throat, pinning him back against hard storm-trooper armor. His hands went instinctively to his throat. His vision swam but he saw one of the techs drop soundlessly to the ground. The other fell too; he banged against his console on the way down, and Drayk made out the hilt of a tiny metal needle stuck in his neck; blood dribbled out from it.

Somehow, he remembered the utility knife at his belt. He dropped one from the cable at his throat and grabbed his

knife. He stabbed wildly until his blade slipped in between the white armor plates on his attacker's arm. He felt the blade stab through flesh, heard a cry through the roar of blood in his ears, felt the pressure on his neck release.

As his attacker dropped him he saw blood spraying from the wound, splashing all over his uniform: dark, violet, alien blood.

There was a flash of rust-red to one side. He spun to face it, but it was too late. The Bothan's arm lashed out. The pain in his throat became searing. He dropped his knife and clutched for his neck but his hands went slippery with blood. His legs collapsed beneath him. He hit the deck hard but he could barely feel it. His lungs strained for breath, and the world went dark around him.

"Fierfek! Fierfek! Fierfek!" Ekrhine swore as Torr tried to wrap a hasty tourniquet around his left arm using the same cable the Em'liy had just choked the Imp commander with.

"Just hold still!" Torr hissed as he wrestled with him. "I can do this!"

"I just hope that shuttle has a kriffing med kit."

Dey'rylan glanced down at the Imp commander. Blood spilled from his throat and onto the cold metal floor; his body twitched, his mouth flapped like a fish's, and his eyes stared upward toward the ceiling. He'd be dead in a minute.

"You sure you jammed the cameras?" Kasck Fre'leir asked as he went around to the room, pulling his poison needles out of the other two Imps and sticking them back in his tunic's hidden pockets.

"Well, if it didn't work, we'll find out real quick, right?" Torr asked as he tugged Ekrhine's tourniquet tighter.

His stormie helmet still on, Jekk Karr went over to one of the consoles and looked it over. Dey'rylan hurried to his side.

"Tell me this thing connects to the main computer core." If it didn't, they were probably as dead as the Imp whose throat Kasck had just slit.

"You should have full access, so long as you can slice it," Karr said.

"I can slice anything," Dey'rylan grunted and shouldered him aside.

Before he could start, the station shuddered again. Ekrhine swore, loudly, and Torr hissed, "Keep it down!"

"The Rogues sure are making this look real." Karr sounded nervous.

"That's the plan," Dey'rylan said. "Now if they'd just stop shooting at us for a minute I could get to work."

Soontir Fel pulled his X-wing away from Boudolayz Orbital Station, then wheeled around for another attack run. He glanced at his scanners as saw Nrin keeping right at his side. They'd made two runs thus far while the rest of the Rogues tangled with the TIEs and the Carrack. The station, as expected, had decent shields, but if they'd brought the whole squad in to fight, they probably could have cracked it open by now.

"Look alert," Nrin called. "Four eyeballs incoming."

Fel checked his scanners and there they were, screaming toward them while the rest of the Rogues tried to draw the Carrack and its squadron away from the station.

"We hook right and catch them head-on," Nrin said. "Understood?"

He was in no position to refuse orders, and he had no better plan anyway. "Understood. On your mark."

They pulled away from the station, out of range of its turbolaser cannons, and wheeled to face the approaching TIEs. He spotted the glow of Boudolayz's surface reflected in their octagonal viewports and rested his targeting reticules on their glint.

"I'll take above, you take below," Nrin ordered. "Lasers only."

Four TIEs began to spew green plasma at the two X-wings. Nrin and Fel shunted power to their shields to absorb the spray, but they still did their best to dance around the first barrage, all the while trying to keep their sights locked on the TIEs.

"Any time, Nrin," Fel muttered.

Then the Quarren said, "Mark!"

Fel squeezed the trigger. His first short speared one TIE through the center of its cockpit. The second clipped the fighter's solar panel and sent it spinning. Nrin caught his first

target where its port solar panel met the support pylon. There was a sharp explosion, and the starboard panel went spiraling through space, leaving debris behind.

The fourth TIE pulled steeply upward. Nrin and Fel cut through the debris where the other three fighters had been; shrapnel sparked and bounced off their strengthened shields and sent their sensors screens flickering.

"Damn," Nrin snapped, "Where's the last one?"

"He must be above," Fel said as static kept bursting across his screens.

Suddenly green plasma flashed in front of him. Nrin swore again. The TIE plunged down on them both, splattering light over their dorsal shields. Fel's astromech droid let out an alarmed wail a half-second before the TIE's plasma blast broke through his shields and caught his fighter's aft.

Fel wrestled with the control stick as it tried to leap from his hand. His fighter shuddered around him. Afraid one of his engines was hit, he looked at his screens: no damage there. His astromech was gone; there was no telling how much damage the shot had done.

"I have him!" he heard Nrin cry, right before the space beneath him lit up with a fireball.

He watched as Nrin's X-wing pulled up and leveled out ahead of him. Four red thrust-engines glowed in his face as the Quarren called, "Status, Rogue Eight."

"Droid is out. Engines are... stable."

"Hyperdrives?"

"Diagnostics are green," he said, but they both knew he'd only find out when time came to escape.

He wasn't ready for that, though. Nrin asked, "Are you good for another run?"

"As long as my torp tubes aren't empty"

"Then form on my wing."

"Understood, Seven."

The data key Dey'rylan had brought along with him was outwardly unremarkable. He'd come wearing it on a cable around his neck, hidden from view beneath his baggy tunic and black fur. The black-cased key, a paw-length long and claw-breadth wide, could be inserted into any standard

console for data transfer. Similar-looking keys could be bought on the civilian market for a modest price, but this one had been specially developed for Republic intel agents. A commerical key could only hope to contain, at most, one one-hundredth of the data stored in the Ubiqtorate archives on Boudolayz Orbital Station.

Dey'rylan's key could store it all.

He didn't know how long it took him to break through all the encryption, open up the files, and begin the data dump onto his key. When he was slicing, he zoned out of everything else: the bodies around him, the nervous voices, even the occasional shudder as the Rogues dropped another torpedo on the station's shields.

But when it was over, he wasted no time. He ejected the key, threw it back around his neck, and called, "Done!"

"Right on time," Karr said. Dey'rylan looked to the far side of the chamber, where the human had just finished setting up two sets of explosive charges along the wall. He looked back at Dey'rylan and said, "Hey, you sure this is an outer bulkhead?"

"Yeah, it's be really embarrassing if we blew into somebody's 'fresher," Ekrhine winced as he held his arm.

Just glad he was making jokes, Dey'rylan glanced back at the console. "Let me double-check. I can pull up a map."

"Ready to signal the shuttle whenever you're ready," Torr said. He'd already pulled out his comlink.

"Map checks out. Should disrupt the shields too, just like we planned." Dey'rylan said. "Let's get out of here."

It took Torr a second to make the call. When he was done, Kasck asked, "You got your beacon?"

"Yeah, it's going. She'll know right where to find us."

"Well, we should be hard to miss, what with the gaping hole we're about to blow," Karr said as he hurried away from his explosive set-up.

"I just hope nobody tries to stop her," Kasck said. "They've gotta be wondering where their CO is right now."

"Well, in a second he'd gonna be drifting frozen in the vacuum." Dey'rylan glanced down at the commander's corpse. "Everybody grab hold of something. Sho-tev, can you handle it?"

"I'm no weakling." The Em'liy had already stuck his stormie helmet back on and was grasping the side of a console with his good hand.

"Great. Devin, where's our ride?"

Torr glanced at his palm-held scanner. "She's coming right up. Should be here any second now." As if on call, his comlink squeaked twice. "Okay, that's the signal. She's in position."

"Everyone hold on!" Dey'rylan gripped the metal console so tight his claws scraped. "Jekk, do it now!"

The human squeezed the trigger and the first set of charges went off. Dey'rylan had been expecting some explosion, some flash of light, some ear-breaking pop. Instead there was a tiny quarter-second of nothing; then a rectangle of sparks appeared in the middle of the bulkhead, making a fiery frame about the size of a standard airlock. Whatever he'd put along the wall was eating its way through the bulkhead.

Then came the pop. The cut-open chunk of the bulkhead winked out of existence, sucked into space. As the wind began to howl around his ears Dey'rylan saw it bounce off the metal frame of the shuttle. Feylis swooped in close enough to kiss their raggedy self-made airlock. Stray objects began to get pulled out the open space; a flying datapad nearly caught Kasck in the head and one of the Imp corpses tumbled out toward the stars.

The shuttle swung its starboard side right next to the hole. The airlock popped open and Feylis stuck her head out. Wind sucked out of her shuttle, tearing off her black cap, swirling loose strings of gold hair around her face. She waved for them to come. They didn't need more prompting.

Rogue Squadron pilots were the best: Feylis has brought the shuttle so close she could reach out, grab Ekrhine by the good hand, and haul him directly into her ship without his feet ever having to kick across the vacuum. Then went Kasck, then Torr, then Karr, and finally Dey'rylan himself. The moment he was in, Feylis sealed the airlock tight. The shuttle's artificial oxygen generator whirled into overdrive to compensate for what they'd just lost. As everyone else lay panting on the floor, Feylis staggered over to the cockpit controls and began to turn the shuttle around.

"Tell us when we're clear," Dey'rylan rasped from his knees.

A second later, she said, "Clear!"

"Jekk, blow that thing."

"With pleasure."

Dey'rylan didn't get to see the second set of explosives go off. He didn't get to see the whole outer wall of the chamber explode, didn't get to see the bodies get flushed out into space. He didn't have to. He reached up and clutched the data-key dangling against his sternum. That was all he needed.

"Time for the last act," Wedge called as he wheeled his X-wing to face the orbital station. He saw the flash of an explosion on its hull, saw the shuttle break clear and run.

"Four flight, what's your status?" he called.

"Ready for one last run," Nrin said.

"Rogue Eight, are you hanging in there?"

"Affirmative, Lead."

He wasn't going to get more out of Fel than that. "Everybody else, get ready to run."

"Glad to, Wedge," Janson said. "This dance is wearing me out."

It was wearing them all out. They'd taken out half of the TIE fighters at no loss of their own, but all of their ships were beaten up and all his pilots tired from the obnoxious game of engage-and-retreat they'd been playing the whole time the insertion team was on the station. He didn't know how long they'd been stalling, but it was long enough.

"One last thing to do," Wedge muttered to himself, and armed his torpedoes.

Feylis' shuttle soared toward him. He dove to meet her. He set his targeting reticules directly on the shuttle's looming cockpit.

This was the riskiest part of the mission, and the most important. It was something Wedge knew only he could take the responsibility for.

He tapped his joystick button twice. Two proton torpedoes streaked forward.

He could judge distance with his eyes. He knew when to tap the joystick one more time. The torps exploded in unison, creating massive burst of light, a bright fireball that made him wince and veer away.

As inertia pinned him back against his seat, his peripheral vision caught Feylis' shuttle bursting through the explosion, energy and debris dancing across its shields as they held. To the Imps on the station, already overwhelmed with the torps Nrin and Fel had just dropped into their unshielded hangar, it would look like Wedge had just blown that fleeing shuttle to vapor.

He wheeled his fighter around to settle on the shuttle's right flank. He pulled ahead slightly so he could glance into the cockpit. He spotted Feylis' bright head, saw her flash a thumbs-up. He flashed his own, then gunned his engines forward. The other Rogues were already jumping out of the system. A few seconds later, he joined them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CORUSCANT

All things considered, the transport business could have been worse. After the Rebels took Brentaal, there'd been a short spike of outgoing traffic from Imperial Center; mostly rich folk or off-worlders making a run for it because they thought a whole fleet of terrorists was just a short hop away. For the few months after that, most of the normal locals stayed put for the same reason. Now that it was clear the Rebels' Coreward offensive had petered out, people started to feel more comfortable hopping planets again, which meant Saaris Transit Limited might climb out of the red this year after all.

Everybody knew the newsnets were all censored by ISB and not very reliable, but a planet with one trillion beings on it generated a lot of gossip, and a businessbeing like Qinla Saaris knew how to filter out fact from fiction pretty well. He and his clan-mates had started running their ferry service up the Hydian Way from Coruscant all the way to the Corporate Sector five years ago, but since the Emperor's death things had gotten messy. He'd had to keep up-to-date on all the latest word-of-mouth to know what parts of space were safe to run his ships through and which might get a transport captured, blown up, or otherwise afflicted with lawsuit-inducing problems.

It was a massive pain, and frankly he wished old Palps had hung on. Granted, Togruta like him hadn't had it the greatest under his rule, but things weren't any better under Isard. At least with Palpatine in charge you could run a stable business. The Rebels said they were all about liberating oppressed

nonhuman races, which was well and good, but they didn't seem to care how much they messed with an honest Togruta's livelihood.

Saaris Transit Limited sent two ships outbound per day: one early in the morning and the other at late evening. The ISB had been slowly taking over customs work from the local Security Force ever since Isard took over, which meant Saaris' flights were often delayed because Imperial black-shirts insisted on opening up everyone's luggage. Because his passengers couldn't blame Isard they blamed him instead, which meant he always had to deal with a raft of customer complaints. The morning crowd was a lot of commuters who regularly took his lines; they had discounted tickets and had been pre-screened by Imperial Center customs, which meant they were more likely to get off on-time.

Saaris was working in the office at the entrance to the landing pad, selling and checking tickets and waving passengers toward the ISB checkpoint when an unfamiliar human came, asking for a one-way ticket to Corsin. He was sure ISB would check her because she was unfamiliar and hoped they didn't give her too hard a time.

He stuck her identi-card into the computer and uploaded her information into his passenger registry. As he waited for the system to confirm her, he glanced over the counter and gave her another look. Corsin was on the edge of Zsinj's territory, as far as his shuttles were going right now, but she was only carrying one bag. She looked a little uncomfortable on her feet; her belly was swelled like it was going to burst and it took him a moment to remember how that only happened when female humans were gestating.

To be polite, he asked, "How much longer, Miss?"

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Your, ah-" What did humans call their spawn? "Your *child*, miss."

"Oh." She rested her free hand on her stomach and smiled politely. "Just a couple more months."

"Male or female?" he asked as the computer finished her registration. He took out her identicard and handed it back.

"I don't know yet. I was waiting until his father and I were together again. Then we'd find out."

"He waiting at Corsin, Miss?"

"That's right."

"You know the transport isn't stopping at Brentaal?"

"Of course. Rebel territory."

"The detour around it won't add more than a day to your trip, Miss. Once you're clear of that little mess you'll have straight, safe flying all the way up the Hydian. Can I have your bank card please?"

"I'll just be paying with chips today, if you don't mind. I can do that, can't I?"

There was no reason why she couldn't, but the flight out to Corsin was fairly expensive and most beings just charged it right to their credit accounts.

He smiled politely and said, "That'll be no problem at all, miss."

Once she paid, he waved her through the gate to where the ISB agents were waiting. Once she was gone, he examined the credits closely. He was good at spotting forgeries and these looked legitimate. As to why she'd insisted on paying with chips, well, he'd probably never know and there was no point in wondering.

As a few more customers came in he kept an eye on the woman and the ISB agents through the window. As he'd been expecting, the ISB agents had no qualms about opening a pregnant woman's travel case and rummaging through it. Apparently, they didn't find anything incriminating, because they waved her through and let her board the transport.

Saaris breathed a tiny sigh of relief. They might even lift off on schedule today.

Syal Antilles Fel placed her suitcase in the overhead compartment and sat down on the seat nearest the window. The chairs in these liners were large and comfortable, designed for long hauls. It would be a several days to Corsin, and from there she didn't know where she'd go. Isard had done a good job of blocking all legitimate transit routes between her territory and Republic-owned systems. Syal could have tried to buy passage with a smuggling ship, but anyone who took illegal passengers on probably wouldn't hesitate to hand her over to the Imperials if they found out

her identity. Here, on this passenger ship with a thousand other beings, she could be something like anonymous.

The line between systems loyal to Isard and the other Imperial warlords was vague, and patrols were a lot more lax than in areas bordering on Republic space. According to Rusty's scuttlebutt, Corsin's governor was loyal to Zsinj, but kept his ports open to pretty much everyone. It was therefore a perfect place to swap ships and keep climbing up the Hydian. Civilians might have been able to pass more or less easily from Isard's territory to Zsinj's, but she bet Zsinj would be on the lookout for ISB agents. Zsinj might have his own intel people on the lookout, but at least at Corsin she'd be safe from Isard's hunters.

That was what she hoped, anyway.

Her heart lifted when the pilot announced they were ready for takeoff. The transport shuddered only a little as it fired its rpeulsors and kicked up from the landing pad. As she rose she leaned close to the window and peered down. The two ISB agents who'd questioned her looked like black insects below.

Then the transport banked, and the landing pad was gone. She kept her eyes on the brilliant spires of Imperial City, her home for almost twenty years. Then the shuttle rose higher still, and the spires fell away. She knew in her heart that she'd never see them again.

The Coruscant system was the bright center of the galaxy, but most of the brightness came from the Imperial Center itself. The system had ten other planets, only one of which was inhabited: Vandoor-3, the next planet sunward from Imperial Center, which was mostly notable for its agriculture and military garrisons. The next ones rimward from the capital were a pair of massive gas giants, Muscave and Improcco, each orbited by twenty-some uninhabited moons mostly used for mining or occasional live fire exercises by the local defense forces.

Because it was so close to Imperial Center, yet received so little traffic, the fifth moon of Muscave was an ideal place for a rendezvous. Thrawn and Niriz, with only a half-dozen stormtroopers as guards, had left *Grey Wolf* behind outside

the system's edge, boarded a shuttle, and taken a short hyperspace hop to their destination.

It should have felt strange, being in the Core again, but Niriz mostly kept wondering whether Isard would greet them with a star destroyer or a TIE squadron and blow them to atoms. Thrawn had been keeping tabs on Imperial Center from the Unknown Regions and it was clear that the intelligence director had put knives in more than a few backs to get where she was. She had to know that Thrawn represented a potential threat to her power.

Niriz was relieved, then, to see only another *Lambda*-class shuttle waiting for them over Muscave's fifth moon.

The two shuttled folded wings and maneuvered to couple ventral airlocks like a pair of birds clasping talons. When their artificial gravity temporarily disabled, Niriz and Thrawn clambered across the wall of the rear hold to the airlock portal. Four stormtroopers floated behind them, E-11 rifles ready.

When the airlock opened, they were met with a mirroring image of four white-armored soldiers. In front of them was Ysanne Isard in her scarlet uniform, white-streaked black hair billowing around her head.

It made her look almost comical, but the woman said with heavy dignity, "Welcome, Grand Admiral Thrawn."

The Chiss inclined his head slightly. "Thank you for having me, Madame Director."

"Come," Isard said. "I have a chamber prepared. We have much to talk about." When Thrawn didn't move right away, she added, "You may take some of your guards into my shuttle. I only want to *talk*."

"As do I." Thrawn held up a hand, twinned fingers out. Two of his stormtroopers stayed in the hold, while two more followed him and Niriz into the other shuttle.

Isard pushed herself toward the back of the hold, saying, "I would like to speak *privately*. No guards for either of us."

"Very well," said Thrawn. "However, I will insist Dagon Niriz accompany me."

Isard's eyes— a disconcerting blue-red pair— darted to the captain. He saw suspicion, and something else. Envy, perhaps, that she had no one to trust as Thrawn trusted him.

He realized that might have been the reason Thrawn brought him here in the first place.

Isard gave a wordless nod, then went through the portal.

The artificial gravity had been localized to their aft chamber, and the three of them awkwardly maneuvered themselves to land boots-first on the deck. There were only two chairs in the small cabin, and without instruction, Niriz took his place over the seated admiral's shoulder.

Isard spared Niriz one more bichromate glare before turning her attention to Thrawn. She placed her hands palm down on her red thighs and said, "You asked for this conference, Admiral. Please go first."

He inclined his head in a slight nod. "You should know that the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium is no longer a threat."

"Exterminated?"

"Broken."

She nodded, satisfied. "What of your warlord nemesis, Nuso Esva?"

Isard had been privileged to more confidential information than anyone else under Palpatine; it was no surprise that she knew about Thrawn's operations in the Unknown Regions. Still, Niriz felt disconcerted.

"Nuso Esva is contained, but not defeated. I do not believe he poses any immediate threat to Imperial space. We will, of course, continue to counter him in his own territory."

She seemed satisfied with that. Likely she'd been afraid that Thrawn was going to announce some hostile takeover of her holdings in the Core.

Thrawn folded white-gloved hands in his lap. "I have been following affairs in this part of the galaxy for the past year, so I'm reasonably familiar with the status of the war against the Rebellion. It doesn't seem that they are in the position to begin a new offensive."

"Their military is exhausted and they're in need of resources," said Isard, "But it is only temporary. To be frank, Admiral, I don't currently have enough ships to stamp them out. And to be even more frank, there are many so-called Imperials who don't want me to."

"Warlords," Thrawn said simply.

“Zsinj. Teradoc. Jerec. Brill. Harrsk. Delvardus. And those are just the ones worth mentioning. They’ve played soft with the Rebels. They’d rather Coruscant fall to a band of alien anarchists than stay in my hands.”

Her voice was tight and bitter. Niriz couldn’t even blame her. The way all the new warlords had flagrantly disrespected traditional Imperial authority had been appalling, even to Niriz himself, whose own allegiance had gradually shifted away from Palpatine.

Thrawn said, “You’re fortunate that I do not agree with them. I believe maintaining the integrity of the Core is our second most important priority. The third most important is reestablishing central authority over the breakaway warlords.”

She raised an eyebrow. “The first?”

“Pacification of threats from what you call the Unknown Regions.”

“Of course,” she smirked. “I won’t quibble over your ranking so long as we’re mostly in agreement. The question, Admiral, is how you plan on helping the Empire here in charted space.”

Isard was desperate for more ships, for Thrawn’s military expertise. Niriz could see that. Thrawn, though, said, “Nuso Esva is my main concern at the moment. I do not believe the Empire will be secure until we have control of the western border. I understand you still have Grand Admirals Grant and Makati in your service.”

“This is correct.” A question hung between them. Isard said, “Tell me, Admiral, what is your opinion of Grant and Makati?”

“I did not spend much time in the Emperor’s court,” he demurred.

“Neither did Grant and Makati. They were never glory-hounds like Teshik or Tigellinus.”

According to rumors, Grand Admiral Tigellinus had initially welcomed Thrawn into the Imperial court, then humiliated and rejected him. If mention of the man angered the Chiss, he gave no sign.

When it became clear Thrawn wasn’t going to give his opinion Isard gave hers. “Makati is a very competent

commander, and very loyal, but he needs more resources. As for Grant, he's capable but too cautious. If he had to chose between his life or the Empire's, he'd choose his own. I can't depend on him."

After a thoughtful pause, Thrawn asked, "What of the garrison at Anaxes? Azure Hammer Command still has the *Whelm* and a large support fleet. Or am I misinformed?"

Isard shook her head. "Admiral Kiez is... cautious also."

In other words, he was unwilling to give Isard his fleet, but unwilling to throw his lot in with a warlord either. Niriz didn't know Kiez well, but he'd heard the man was a big devotee of High Human Culture policies. He'd never give Thrawn command of anything.

"I've tasked Grand Admiral Makati with planing an offensive against Zsinj," Isard said. "I'm sure he would welcome your input. He's a very practical man."

In other words, he wouldn't reject Thrawn just for being non-human. Thrawn, though, said, "I'll take that under consideration. However, there is another reason why I came to see you."

"And that is?"

"I want to help you solve a problem, Madam Director. A private one."

"Private?" she looked honestly confused.

Thrawn nodded. "You've kept it off the news-nets, but I know that General Baron Soontir Fel has defected to the Rebels, and that you are searching for his wife."

Anger flared in her eyes. She nodded.

"I'm sure you are trying to capture Wynssa Starflare, and thereby capture him, at which point you will dispense the justice due to traitors. That is what I want to help you with."

"What makes you think I need your help?" she said defensively.

"Despite being intimately familiar with ISB and Ubiquitorate operations, you have failed to capture either Fel or his wife after six months."

Isard's eyes darted to the side, like she was considering how much to say. When they swung back to Thrawn she said, "We were very close. Just days ago I had a team tracking rebel intelligence agents who'd come to Imperial Center to

extract her. They shadowed the rebel agents as they retrieved her and took her to a safehouse.” She scowled. “Unfortunately, my agents failed in their attempt to seize their target.”

“Killed?” asked Thrawn.

“As well as two rebel agents. Their corpses were ransacked and Starflare’s body wasn’t on the scene. We can only assume Starflare took their identicards and ran. My operatives reported only two rebel agents were with her, so I suspect she’s alone. She’s probably trying to get off Imperial Center, if she hasn’t already escaped.”

“You have no way of tracing her?”

Isard hesitated again, then said, “The chief ISB agent on that mission was carrying a special identicard that grants him access to almost any location in Imperial space. That identicard also contains a tracer chip that periodically emits an isotopic tracer transmission on a very, *very* narrow frequency. It wasn’t on his body.”

“And you believe Starflare took that card?”

“She probably doesn’t even know what it is. She probably took it because it looked useful.”

“And have you found that pulse transmission on Imperial Center?”

Isard scowled. “There was a... communications blackout on the team. The transmission can only be read for a limited time and my operatives were dead for hours before we knew the mission failed. The agents responsible have been punished.”

Thrawn leaned forward. “If you doubt your agents’ abilities, I have a special team standing by to help your search.”

“Special how?”

“They’re some of my best men. They came up through Imperial ranks, just as we did. Right now, I suspect Wynssa Starflare is going to flee for warlord territory. It’s easier to get into than Rebel-held space and much harder for your ISB agents to reach. My team has no such limits.”

Suspicious, she asked, “Why would you help me capture Starflare?”

“Because I want Baron Fel captured as much as you do.”

“And what do you want in return?”

Thrawn spread his hands. "Baron Fel, of course."

She stared at him, considering. "Alive."

He nodded.

"Baron Fel is a traitor. He deserves what all traitors deserve, Admiral, and frankly, I've been very eager to give it to him personally. Why should I leave his fate in your hands?"

"Because he will *be* in my hands, and soon. After that, he will never fly for the Rebels again. I promise that."

"You sound very confident in your men."

"I am," he said. "Are you?"

Isard wrestled with a wince until she turned it into a scowl. "All right. I will give you all the intelligence I have on Baron Fel and his wife. Now please, tell me about these special agents of yours."

"Are you *sure* we're right for this, sir?" asked Daric LaRone as he stood in Thrawn's briefing room aboard *Grey Wolf*. "None of us have formal intel experience."

"Your team survived ISB pursuit for three months while waging a private war against corruption in the Empire," the Grand Admiral said as he paced in front of the viewport. *Grey Wolf* was parked far outside the Coruscant system and there were only distant stars outside.

"I know, sir, but don't you have other agents? Vaantaar, for example, or—"

Thrawn held up a hand. "Vaantaar does not know Imperial space. Very few of my men do. Yours, however, have been all across the galaxy and have experience blending in and evading detection."

"What about the five-oh-first, sir?"

"You've trained a highly competent unit. They will survive until you return." Thrawn held out a small data-chip. "This contains everything Isard gave us about the target's last known whereabouts and how to track her."

He took it, ran his thumb along its metallic edge. "Where was she last seen?"

"Imperial Center, two days ago. It's very likely she's offworld by now, but it may be possible to find where she went. I've obtained a ship for your team. Mandalorian design,

but often sold to civilians. It's been stocked with weapons, as well as medical and surveillance equipment. And, if you decide to use them, five sets of stormtrooper armor."

"You want us to be ready for anything."

"As I said, the target has quite likely fled Imperial Center by now. She'll probably try to get to Rebel space via warlord territory. Her main goal is to escape Isard."

LaRone wasn't quite sure why they were helping Isard track down a fugitive. Because he had to find out at some point, he asked, "Admiral, who is the target?"

Thrawn turned to fix red eyes on him. "You've heard of Baron Soontir Fel, of course."

LaRone blinked. "Of course."

"Six months ago, Baron Fel defected to the Rebels. He currently flies with their elite Rogue Squadron. Your assignment is to capture his fugitive wife."

It took a moment to compute. "You mean Wynssa Starflare? The *actress*?"

"The same. Though I'm sure she's changed her appearance to be less recognizable."

The little chip in his hand felt brick-heavy. "Sir... Is our goal to capture Starflare, then use her to capture Fel?"

"Correct."

"Are we doing this for Isard? Or are we doing this for *us*?"

"Isard wants him alive so she can kill him herself. I believe he's much more valuable if he stays alive."

Of course Isard wanted him dead. He was a hero of the Empire turned traitor. LaRone was a traitor too, in his own way. He didn't like to think of himself like that. After he'd taken his squad on the run he'd kept telling himself he was serving the Empire, just in his own way. Even after signing on with Thrawn and leaving the known galaxy behind, he'd still told himself he was serving, even though he knew the empire Thrawn had built in uncharted space was very different from the one Palpatine had made.

Maybe that was the whole point. Thrawn had offered LaRone and his men a second chance. Now he wanted to do the same for Baron Fel.

It was definitely a better fate than whatever Isard had planned for him.

LaRone couldn't express how much Thrawn's trust meant to him; how it was flattering and terrifying at the same time. Instead of trying to stay it, he snapped a salute and said, "We'll find her, sir."

Thrawn simply nodded and gestured for him to leave.

As LaRone marched down the halls he felt like his head had gone separate from his body. Everything seemed dreamy, unbelievable. He rode the lift back down to the ready-room, where Quiller, Marcross, Brightwater, and Grave were all the middle of a sabacc game.

"Hey Quiller," he called, "We've got a new mission, search-and-retrieve. You'll never guess who the target is..."

When Palpatine appointed his grand admirals at the Fete Week Celebration, he'd ignited a raft of speculation and rumor-mongering in the Imperial court as to why he'd picked those twelve men to be his elite commanders, removing them from the Imperial Navy's formal command structure and making them answerable only to him. The rumor-mongers believed there was some secret unifying rationale behind the Emperor's choices, and jealously traded what they believed to be great secrets to which only Palpatine and his elite twelve were privy.

As usual, the rumor-mongers missed the point. Palpatine's rationale was only ever apparent to Palpatine, though by the end Octavian Grant was starting to have his doubts about even that. He'd been watching the man in action for thirty years, wondering which trait would ultimately define his life: his genius, his ambition, or his arrogance.

At Endor, the Rebels had given an answer.

It was, at least, a relief to Grant that in all the swirling rumors, his name didn't raise the most confusion. He wasn't young like Tigellinus, a mongrel like Pitta, a low-born over-ambitious social-climber like Zaarin, or a lunatic like Il-Raz. He came from noble Fondorian family, he boasted a number of victories against the Rebels and the Separatists before them, and he had more years of combined service in the Judicial Force, Republic, and Imperial fleets than any other grand admiral except the late Josef Grunger. Despite an aversion to politicking in the Imperial Court, he'd nonethe-

less managed to build a network of loyal allies in the Imperial armed forces, made largely of younger officers whose careers he'd shepherded, and who'd never forgotten what they owed him.

Most of those connections were still in the navy, though a few had transferred to the army. Grant had only one ally who worked in Imperial Intelligence, which made him the most valuable of all.

The night before his departure for his conference with Ardur Kaine, Grant paid Colonel Morrell a personal visit. Isard was surely aware of his relationship with his former naval intelligence officer, and they took great steps to avoid notice. They came dressed in plainclothes, blending in with the hundreds of other beings wandering around Monument Plaza that evening. If Isard was watching one or both of them, it would be impossible to read their lips in the dark or pick out their voices from the clamor.

Still, Grant felt tense as he and Morrell walked lazy loops around the statue to Wulff Yularen that had been erected after terrorists had blown old admiral to bits over Yavin, along with Tarkin and so many more men Grant had known for decades.

"You keep looking at the statue," Morrell comments as he sauntered along, both hands stuck in the pockets of his trousers. "Wondering if they'll put you up there some day? Personally, I think you'd look splendid right next to that statue of Grand Moff Tarkin."

"They'd better not," Grant sniffed. "They've turned this place into a monument to the Empire's martyrs. Yularen, Tarkin, Romodi..."

"Don't forget Palpatine," Morrell nodded at the statue in the center of the plaza that towered twice as high as the rest. That one had been erected long before Endor and they both knew it, but when put alongside all the others it started to look like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I've heard Isard's planning to put one up for Grand Admiral Syn," Morrell continued. "I'm guessing not for Pitta or Grunger."

"They deserve one as much as Zaarin."

Morrell slowed his pace and looked up at the high stony underside of Yularen's jaw. "I'm sure you didn't ask me here to talk about statues."

"I want to make sure I don't become one."

Morrell allowed a slanted grin. "Looking to stay informed?"

"Keeping informed means keeping alive. Now more than ever."

"And you don't trust our illustrious leader to tell you everything you need to know?"

"Isard seems to think I can work miracles just because Palpatine gave me a white uniform. She thinks I didn't capture Grunger's super star destroyer because I wasn't *trying* hard enough."

Morrell chuckled, though for the life of him Grant didn't know what was so funny.

The other man drew a hand from his pocket. In the darkness, Grant could just barely see distant light reflect off the smooth side of a datacard. Morrell's hand casually swung forward; Grant picked the card and dropped it in his pocket. If Isard had watchers in the night, they'd never have spotted it.

Grant was an Imperial Grand Admiral from one of the finest houses on Fondor, but here he was, sneaking in the dark like a common criminal. It was degrading and humiliating but, in a strange way, exciting.

"Latest reports," Morrell said. "Things I thought you'd be interested in."

"Anything on Kaine?"

"Actually, no. It seems he's locked down his sectors pretty tight. We've got agents in Zsinj territory, but even they're having a hard time pulling out useful data. The ones Zsinj doesn't catch and kill, he feeds false intel."

"He was always a clever one," Grant said, trying to keep the disappointment from his voice. It seems he'd come all this way for nothing.

"Some interesting bits of local stuff you might like."

"Oh really?"

Morrell ignored his sarcasm. "We've been having problems with sabotage on the Eclipse project. Isard's trying

to push construction on Kuat to go faster, but that's hard without compromising security. She's really trying to fix her lack of super star destroyers."

"Yes, she did seem rather... insecure about that."

"Ah, and another thing. You know Baron Fel defected to the Rebels?"

"Of course. Isard *does* tell me pertinent information from time to time."

"Well, I'm glad, because that means you *also* know she's been trying to capture Fel's wife for the past six months."

"Are you telling me she's succeeded?"

"Close, but not quite. Her ISB agents tracked Starflare and two rebel operatives to a safehouse. When they tried to break in they caught resistance."

"You mean they all got killed trying to nab one vapid holocaustress?"

"I'm sure the rebel agents helped. They got killed in the fighting too but Starflare slipped through the cracks and escaped Imperial Center."

"Well. I'm glad to see I'm not *solely* responsible for her awful mood."

"The reports since have been interesting. Isard removed everyone associated with the Starflare hunt from the op."

"You mean the ones that *weren't* killed?"

"Yes. They've all been reassigned. She didn't designate any new ISB agents to track Starflare... But she just got an initial report from someone else."

Grant frowned. "How do you know she didn't just assign agents outside your... scope of vision?"

"My 'scope of vision' is as wide as I need it to be. Whoever's tracking Starflare, they're not ISB."

"She wouldn't hire mercenaries for something this important."

"I didn't think so either, but I'm low on other options. It would make some kind of sense, considering."

"Considering what?"

"They think Starflare grabbed a ship and hopped off-planet. She'll probably be trying to make her way to Rebel-held space, likely through warlord territory."

“Hmm. That does make sense. Their borders are more... porous.”

“Exactly. And Zsinj and Teradoc have been good at picking off Isard’s agents. If she tries to use ISB people to grab Starflare in their space-”

“There’s a good chance the warlords would learn of it and grab her instead.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t believe it’s mercenaries, not for a target like that.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. All I know is that Isard’s new team- whoever they are- got in a ship and are chasing after her.”

It was intriguing, but Grant had no idea what to do with that information. The only way it *might* be useful would be if Starflare tried hiding in Kaine’s territory, though even though, Grant wasn’t sure what he could do about it.

Still, Morrell was doing him a favor. Whoever had Wynssa Starflare had Baron Fel, and there were few more valuable men in the galaxy.

“Thank you for this, Colonel,” he said finally.

“How long will you away from Imperial Center?”

“That is... uncertain. At least a week. I’ll let you know when I return. I might require an update.”

“I’m happy to serve, sir.”

And he really was. Grant was grateful for that. Loyalty was supposed to go two ways, and benefit both parties. If Isard understood that, she’d just might have a chance of saving the Empire. But instead, it was up to Grant to find a way to save himself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOME ONE

Tycho Celchu rarely looked back on his years in Imperial service fondly, but every once in a while, nostalgia came and tapped him on the shoulder.

Back when he'd been a TIE pilot aboard the star destroyer *Accuser*, he'd only dropped into his fighter's ball cockpit right before launch. As TIEs weren't hyperdrive-capable, he'd only ever spent at most fifteen minutes sitting in his crash seat before jumping out of the hangar for a patrol flight or an attack mission. And when the job was done, he'd fly right back into *Accuser* and jump out of his TIE, eager to stretch and jump and shake away the unique cocktail of stiff, tense, and stir-crazy that you only ever found in a starfighter cockpit.

Nowadays, he flew X-wings. They were hyperspace-capable and far more versatile than TIEs, but sometimes they really made him miss his Imperial days.

The mission to Boudolayz required seven hours in hyperspace getting there and another seven hours back. He'd gotten plenty of rack time before leaving *Home One* and he'd spent most of the seven inbound hours doing small stretches in his cockpit, reviewing intel and data plans, gnawing at rations, or holding mostly one-sided conversations with his astromech droid. All the while, expectation of the coming fight had left adrenaline coursing through his body. He'd felt stiff sometimes, but never tired.

Some people could sleep in their X-wing cockpits. Wedge could do it, and so could Janson. Tycho wasn't one of them.

It seemed to be a trait more common in pilots who *hadn't* gotten their chops in short-range TIEs. As a result, he spent the seven hours back to *Home One* unable to sleep or do anything except want to get out of his fighter really, really badly.

When they finally landed and he finally got to jump down onto a solid deck for the first time in fifteen hours, he didn't know whether he wanted to drop in bed or sprint to the gym and work himself into a sweat. He opted for a compromise. Once he got out of his flight suit, he sprinted for his quarters as fast as his legs and lungs would let him.

As a captain and Rogue Squadron's executive officer, Tycho got a small but fairly homey cabin aboard *Home One*. It was buried somewhere deep inside the Mon Cal Cruiser's superstructure, so there wasn't a view, but he'd been seeing nothing but stars and hyperspace for fifteen hours and a blank white bulkhead was just fine with him now.

When he stepped into his room, and the door hissed shut behind him, he paused before turning on the lights. He froze where he was in the pure-dark room, back against the cool metal door. He'd been panting when he'd come in but he held his breath; for a second he thought he'd heard someone else's respiration. He slowly moved one hand to his waistband, only to grasp at empty air. He'd left his service pistol on the Rogues' locker room with all his other gear.

A soft voice said, "You're paranoid, Tycho."

He let out his breath, raise his hand, and punched the light switch on the wall. For a second, the white forced his eyelids shut. When they opened, she was an arm's reach away. Her mouth was tilted in a smile that was tight, amused, and almost mocking.

"You're *really* not supposed to do that," he told Winter.

She leaned forward and kissed him once on the lips. "I wanted to surprise you."

"You could have done it without scaring the blazes out of me."

She reached up and cupped his cheek with one hand. "Aren't fighter pilots supposed to be fearless?"

"I wish," he said honestly.

Winter smirked again, then stepped away. Tycho followed her and dropped himself down on his room's two-person sofa. Winter, still standing, said, "You look tired."

"I just spent fifteen hours in an X-wing."

"Yes, I'd heard that. I got aboard just after you left."

Of course she'd heard it. Winter worked for NRI, which meant she heard all sorts of interesting tidbits, most of which were way more important than Tycho's flight schedule. But Winter remembered everything; her eidetic memory was what made her one of Cracken's most valuable agents. Over the past year, her missions had sporadically coincided with Rogue Squadron ops, and he'd put effort in breaking through Winter's aloof exterior, never quite knowing how much she reciprocated his own feelings. Even now, after surprising him in his private quarters, she started scouring his meager possessions, as if determined to look at anything but him.

Tycho sighed and slumped against the sofa's cost cushions. "Winter," he said, "What are you doing here? It's got to be for something special."

"I just finished up a field op," she said innocently. "Cracken wanted me to report for debriefing, but he's busy for the next few hours."

"A debriefing. In person?"

"It's the most secure way to do it."

"Fair enough. I don't suppose it has anything to do with our raid at Boudolayz?"

"I didn't even know you were at Boudolayz."

He supposed he believed her. That op had been put together with Admiral Drayson's team, not Cracken's, though he'd never been quite sure where NRI's purview ended and fleet intel's began.

"So you really don't know what your next mission is?" he asked. "You're just waiting?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Well." He slapped both hands on his thighs. "Me too."

She glanced down at him, finally, and smiled that tight smile. "Well. Amazing how that works out."

"We deserve a lucky break. Come on, sit down."

After a short show of reluctance, Winter dropped next to him on the sofa. She leaned against him and rested her white-

haired head against his. Her weight and warmth felt good, and he snaked an arm around her shoulder.

"Who knows," he said. "Maybe next op we'll be teamed up again."

"I hope not," she said seriously. "It hasn't worked out well in the past."

She sort of had a point. "Okay. I admit Ciutric was a mess, but we got out of Axxila okay."

"If you ignore the part about getting captured by Leonia Tavira."

"But like I said, we got out okay." He paused, then added. "And you kissed me at the end. That was mostly what I was talking about."

She shuddered slightly in restrained laughter.

"So that was a big deal. So big I can definitely overlook the part about getting kidnapped and beaten up by a teenage girl playing pirate." He paused, then added. "Seriously. Changed my life."

He could tell she was amused, if she wouldn't admit it. In truth, their capture by Tavira had been a harrowing experience, in some ways worse than tangling with the Empire's best fighters. Even when fighting Fel and his 181st, their airborne duels had followed familiar rules of starfighter combat. In contrast, Leonia Tavira was a mercurial, unpredictable enemy. Supposedly she'd last been seen in the Corporate Sector; he hoped the Rogues never ran into her again.

He heard Winter sigh, then ran a hand through her white hair and said, "How long until you have to see Cracken?"

She shifted her head so she could look up at him with a smile in her eyes. "Long enough," she said.

Once Alpha Black returned to *Home One* with the data retrieved from Boudolayz, it took almost two standard days to decrypt and parse it all. Dey'rylan and his people did most of the data-work, though select parts were shared with Cracken's NRI staff. After everything was analyzed, Drayson met with Willham Burke, admiral of the Third Fleet. Once they were in agreement, they took their case before the Provisional Council, or at least what scraps of it were currently available on the flagship. Mon Mothma of

Chandrila and Leia Organa of Alderaan were both at Milagro and Sian Tevv of Sullust was visiting his newly-liberated homeworld. As expected, the bulk of the debate ended up being between Admiral Ackbar of Dac and Borsk Fey'lya of Kothlis.

Hiram Drayson, for his part, did his best to keep a straight face as he and Burke stood at the head of the table and watched the Bothan and the Mon Cal go at it.

"This is *hardly* a time for another offensive," Fey'lya was saying. The Bothan's cream-colored fur was literally bristling in anger. "Trying to interpose ourselves in a fight between Makati and Zsinj is veritable suicide."

"We may not get so an opportunity like this again," Ackbar insisted. "Makati will be vulnerable and distracted battling Zsinj's forces. That leaves us an opening to strike."

"Is that your goal, then, to kill Makati?" Fey'lya swung his violet eyes on Drayson and Burke. "Or is it to actually take and hold Bandomeer?"

"I won't deny Bandomeer is a tempting target," Burke said. "We need ionite and that planet has enough to supply our entire fleet indefinitely."

Fey'lya drummed his claws on the tabletop. "Yes, yes, but do we actually have the resources to *hold* the planet?"

Burke and Ackbar exchanged looks across the table. The Mon Cal said, "According to the Ubiqtorate's report, Zsinj's assets are mainly in orbit. The planet surrendered without a fight and the extraction facilities on the surface don't seem to have altered their work either."

"So in other words, you expect to chase away Zsinj and Makati, then park a few ships in orbit?"

"We acknowledge that it will not be easy to hold the planet," said Burke, "But Bandomeer's resources make it worth the effort."

"*If* you can defeat both Zsinj and Makati." Fey'lya shook his head. "I would remind you all that I was firmly against sending a team to Ciutric also."

"You were right in that instance," Ackbar admitted. "But this is different. This is not a retrieval mission. This is about taking territory from two of our most dangerous opponents. If we succeed at Bandomeer—"

“Yes, I know, it will be a great propaganda coup,” Fey’lya waved a paw. “The question is, what will it *cost*? We can’t stand another Mindor either, let alone another Ciutric.”

“Mindor involved heavy fighting over ground assets,” said Burke. “This fight is going to be in orbit.”

Councilor Doman Beruss of Corellia coughed politely into her hand. Once eyes fell on her, she said, “What assets do you plan on using for this mission?”

“At least a half-dozen destroyers and heavy cruisers, plus support vessels,” said Burke. “We’ll want to bring our best. That will include Aggressor Wing and Rogue Squadron.”

Beruss acknowledged mention of her nephew’s unit with the tiniest nod. Beside her, Wookiee Councilor Kerrithrarr gave a low rumble. Drayson couldn’t understand any Wookiee tongue, and he had to wait for the councilor’s protocol droid to translate.

“The Councilor wants to know how exactly you plan on intervening in a fight between Zsinj and Makati.”

Burke glanced at Drayson, and the other admiral spoke up. “We don’t know the timetable the grand admiral is looking at, only that he’s planning to invade. With your permission, we’d like to assemble a task force as quickly as possible, then place ourselves in close orbit behind Envos, the planet nearest to the system’s primary. It’s a big gas giant with four moons, and it gives off a unique radiation that will help mask the presence of our ships. It would be easy to hide a task force there and monitor Makati’s invasion.”

Kerrithrarr roared once more, and his protocol droid translated, “The Councilor wonders how you will know to intervene, given that you know neither Makati’s battleplan, nor how Zsinj will react.”

Councilor Verrinnefra B’tlogg of Elom said, “Perhaps it would be wise to study past battles against Zsinj and Makati. Their past actions should predict future ones.”

Drayson cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, while we’ve had plenty of opportunities to observe Zsinj in combat, he is not the most... easily predictable of commanders. As for Makati, we’ve never faced him in battle ourselves. After giving him his promotion to grand admiral, the Emperor sent him off to oversee the Corporate Sector.”

"The Corporate Sector," Fey'lya seized on the name. "May I ask, gentlemen, why we are not directing our attention there?"

Burke frowned, earnestly confused. "Makati was the Emperor's delegate there, yes, but he hasn't been back to the Corporate Sector since Endor. In fact--"

"That's the point." Fey'lya curled one paw into a fist. "It's far in the Outer Rim. It's nominally loyal to Isard but Zsinj controls most of the space between it and Coruscant, and we can be sure he's put out feelers to its Board of Directors. It has more raw resources than a hundred Bandomeers. If we want to insert ourselves into a three-way fracas, we should do it there."

"Moving our forces all the way to the Corporate Sector would be--"

"This has nothing to do with military might. This is about diplomacy. Negotiation. Making deals. That is the language the Corporate Sector Authority speaks and it's the language we must speak too, if we're going to be a real government."

Kerrithrarr roared, and his droid said, "The Council wants to point out that the Corporate Sector Authority is renowned for its corrupt, oppressive government. If we were to strike a deal with them for their resources, we'd be condoning their behavior and betraying the very principles the New Republic has sworn to protect."

"The Councilor is wise as ever," Fey'lya sighed. The Bothan could make any compliment sound like an insult. "However, principles are valuable but so are resources, and so are the lives of thousands of good soldiers we'd put at risk by trying to get between Makati and Zsinj at Bandomeer." His eyes flicked back to Drayson. "I still don't understand why we can't do to Makati what we did to Grunger and Pitta."

"Makati is based off Coruscant," the admiral said. "Grunger had a loose alliance of captains under his wing. It was easy to insert an agent because they were disorganized. Makati runs a much tighter operation, and he does it right under Isard's guidance."

"All the more reason to call off this foolish mission and put our attention elsewhere."

Cautiously, Councilor Beruss said, "Makati will be vulnerable outside his own territory. We may not get another chance like this."

Fey'lya looked at Ackbar. "Clarify for me, please. Is the goal of this mission to seize Bandomeer or kill Makati? It seems to me like you're trying to do too many things at once."

The Mon Cal's big eyes dropped to the table in thought for a moment, then swung upward. "Our primary goal is to kill Makati. If that can be accomplished, it will be up to Admiral Burke's digression whether to pursue the liberation of Bandomeer."

He glanced at Burke. "And you plan to accomplish all this with a half-dozen heavy cruisers?"

"I already said we'll be bringing our best. We've also sent out feelers to Fenn Shysa. His Mandalorian Protectors helped us turn the tide at Mindor. We're hoping they can help us again here too."

"Mercenaries." Fey'lya shook his head and passed his glare around the table. "There are too many unknowns here. Too many risks. I cannot support this expedition."

"Fortune favors the bold," Ackbar said. "I vote in favor."

Fey'lya's fur bristled but he turned his attention to the other three councilors present. Kerrithrarr rumbled, and his droid put in, "The Councilor believes this is an opportunity we cannot ignore, even accounting for the risks."

"Agreed," Beruss said soberly.

That was already three in favor. Drayson's pulse quickened. Councilor B'thog, however, said thoughtfully, "There are many uncertain variables that cannot be accounted for at this time. I understand that fighting warfare is always like this, and that no battleplan long survives a real battle. However, a battleplan must at least provide the illusion of certainty. I see none here. I vote against."

Fey'lya leaned back in his chair and looked at Ackbar. "Well. Three against two. I suppose that means your plan can go ahead for now. But when Mon Mothma and Princess Leia return from Milagro--"

"Their opinions will be consulted," Ackbar said firmly. "But until then, we move ahead."

“Very well.” Fey’lya’s fur bristled. “I hope for all our sakes I won’t be proven right, *again*.”

When Wedge received the battle plan for the operation at Bandomeer, he was gathered with the collection of senior-level officers designated to take part, including Horton Salm from fighter command. He sat next to the Y-wing pilot, listening intently to Admiral Burke.

It was, all things considered, a pretty vague battle plan, but naval command seemed intent on going through with it, as it seemed to be the best chance at taking out Grand Admiral Makati away from the Core.

Wedge wasn’t happy having so many variables in the battle equation, but he his attention kept on drifting to the senior figures watching from the back of the room. He kept on glancing over his shoulder at Admiral Drayson and General Cracken as the two intel chiefs quietly whispered to one another as Burke carried on with his presentation.

When the briefing was done, he quietly excused himself to Salm and vectored for the NRI chief. Drayson and Cracken had just slipped out the door and into the main corridor when Wedge caught up with them.

“General, Admiral,” he said, “I was wondering if we could talk for a moment.”

Drayson just gave him a sidelong glance, but Cracken said, “Talk about what, Commander?”

“I suppose this is a question for both of you,” he said as the two older men kept walking down the hall without flagging their paces. “I understand the intel we got from Boudolayz has been completely reviewed. I was wondering if you’d retrieved anything from the Ubiqtorate about my sister.”

Cracken and Drayson exchanged wordless looks. Wedge’s breath caught in his chest. Drayson said, “There was a huge amount of data retrieved from Boudolayz. We had to split it among our staffs just to process it as quickly as we did.”

“I know that. But sirs, if the Ubiqtorate knows anything about Syal-”

“We understand, Commander,” Cracken said. “I’m not aware of anything in the files NRI reviewed, but we’ll give it a second look for anything about your sister.”

Wedge nodded, but felt vaguely disappointed that he'd had to make the request at all. Finding Syal wasn't just important to him, it was important to Fel and by extension the fate of Rogue Squadron and the whole New Republic. Cracken and Drayson weren't fools; they had to know that.

"All right," he said, "I'll go inform my brother-in-law. He's been insistent."

"Of course," said Drayson. "He has a right to know."

After that, Wedge made his way back to his quarters. He wasn't due to give the squadron a full briefing about Bandomeer until later; instead he invited Tycho, Winter, and Fel to squeeze into his cramped cabin.

He relayed to them what Cracken had relayed to him. Tycho and Winter sat side-by-side on Wedge's bed while Wedge leaned his back to the bulkhead and Fel stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest and his face locked into a scowl.

"Are you sure General Cracken is reliable?" Fel asked.

"Of course he's reliable."

"Spies keep secrets all the time. It's part of their job."

"What secret? If Isard had Syal, she'd have announced it by now. She'd be trying to lure *you* in."

Still scowling, Fel swung his dark gaze on Winter. "Were you part of the analysis team?"

The white-haired woman didn't flinch from his glare. "I was. And I didn't find anything about your wife."

"And can you vouch for everyone on your team?"

"No. I only know the parcel they had me working on."

"I think you're jumping at shadows here," Tycho said defensively. "Why would they *not* tell you about Syal?"

"I don't know. Perhaps to string me along, to make sure I serve them."

"That was the way the Empire did things," Wedge said. "We're not like Isard."

Fel sighed and looked down at the floor. "Apologies. You know all of this has been... difficult. I placed my trust in one government and it betrayed me. It betrayed everything I thought it stood for."

"So you found a better one," Tycho said. "I went through a lot of what you have, remember?"

"You were different. After the Empire destroyed Alderaan, it destroyed all your doubts about defection too. Am I right?"

"I admit my moment of moral clarity might have been clearer than yours. But that happens when somebody blows up your planet and kills everyone you knew and loved."

Fel didn't flinch at the bitterness in Tycho's voice. "When you defected, you had nothing to lose."

"That might have been part of it."

"You did, but you defected anyway," Wedge told Fel. "That's why we're not questioning your loyalties. Or your bravery."

He'd said it to sooth Fel, but it didn't seem to work. Agitated, the other man glanced at the door. "I was faced with a choice. I had to look at the past and make a judgment to decide my future."

"That's what we all did when we joined the Republic, One way or the other."

Fel nodded and turned for the door he'd been itching to exit for the past few minutes. No one stopped him from going.

After Fel left, Winter gave Wedge a serious look. "There is one possibility. Your sister might be dead, and they don't want to tell you."

Wedge looked down at his boots. "The idea had occurred to me."

"There's no reason to think that, though," Tycho said firmly. "Our people want her alive. So does Isard. There's no reason anyone would try to kill her."

"Accidents happen," Winter said softly. "But you're right. Odds are Syal is still out there somewhere, running. Hiding."

"It should be this hard. It shouldn't be taking this long. I understand why Fel's frustrated."

"It's a huge galaxy. There are a billion places to hide, even for Wynssa Starflare."

"I know. And I trust Cracken, I really do. I can't help being impatient, though."

"Honestly, I think you're handling it better than anyone else would," Tycho said. "You're a good soldier, Wedge. Always have been."

"Maybe. Sometimes I wish I were a better brother."

Tycho looked at the door through which Fel had left. "I'm more worried about her husband. You can tell it's tearing him apart."

"It should be. He knows Syal better than I ever did." Wedge gave a long, long sigh. "But I can't just stand around feeling sorry for myself. I've got to prepare a briefing for the Rogues. About Bandomeer."

Tycho rose from the bed. "Like I said, Wedge, you're a good soldier. You never let your head get out of the fight."

"And Fel?"

"He's a good soldier too."

Wedge looked at that closed door and wondered. He wondered if Fel's passion was greater than his own. He wondered if his brother-in-law would really sit, wait, and trust in his new leaders to fulfill their promise.

When Soontir Fel approached Devin Torr in *Home One's* cantina, he tried very hard to make it look like a spontaneous, casual act, even though it was anything but. Since the mission to Boudolayz he'd read up on the public data files for the members of the boarding team. As expected, they didn't tell much, but he did, at least, learn that Torr was born on Esseles and served for a time in Imperial intelligence before switching sides. He was the only member of that group to have defected, which made him the best person to approach.

Torr was standing at the counter, having just placed his drink order to a Mon Cal bartender, when Fel took the spot beside him. He, too, placed an order, then allowed his attention to slip sideways to the other man.

"Devin Torr, isn't it?" he said.

Torr glanced at him. "Soontir Fel."

He hadn't been expecting a warm greeting, but he put out his hand anyway. "That was a good operation your people pulled at Boudolayz."

"We couldn't have done it without your flying." Torr took his hand and shook, but without apparent enthusiasm.

"Still, I wanted to thank you. I'll buy your next drink, if you'd like. Assuming you're not meeting anyone else."

Torr chuckled. Fel had the feeling he was being laughed at. "And what if I am? What if I'm supposed to meet a lovely Zeltron lady in five minutes?"

"If you are, then I'll excuse myself, though I didn't know there were any Zeltrons aboard *Home One*."

Torr chuckled again. "There aren't. Unfortunately. Not that I would expect a married man like you to look too hard."

"You know I'm married?" Fel had the feeling this entire exercise in subterfuge was painfully transparent. Torr was a spy, of course, and he was not.

"Everybody knows you married Wynssa Starflare. I also know Cracken's people are looking for her. I don't know much else beyond that, but I know that at least."

"I see." The bartender placed his drink on the counter, but he didn't pick it up.

Torr nodded at the glass. "You did pay for that, didn't you?"

His hand fumbled for it. "Yes. Of course."

"I have the feeling you want to talk to me about something, so let's find a quiet booth, all right?"

"Gladly."

He followed Torr to the opposite side of the bar, where they set down in what, Fel believed, as the same booth Feylis and Avan and occupied the night after their briefing for the Boudolayz mission. This conversation was going to be private but hardly as intimate.

"I wanted to ask you a personal question," he began.

"Well, let's have it." Torr placed both hands on the table.

"I know from your file that you spent some time in Imperial service. Intelligence."

"I was fairly low-level." Torr sipped his drink. "I definitely never made the kind of name for myself you did."

"I'm aware of that. I'm less curious about your work as what came after."

"You mean my break from the Empire."

"Yes. Was it... difficult for you?"

"Deciding to switch sides wasn't difficult. They mostly had me doing civilian surveys, they called it. Do you know what that is? It's when you trawl through all the info you can get on private citizens who are flagged as 'potential problems.'

That means just about anything. If your neighbor doesn't like your pet monkey-lizard, he can call ISB and tell them he suspects you of sedition, without any evidence, and you go on the watch list. And people like me start trawling through your private data until we find something. If we do, your life is over. And sometimes if we don't. Have to make an example of people, you know."

Fel was sure people like Torr had been assigned to trawl through his and Syal's personal histories for Isard and felt relieved that they'd never discovered his wife's lost brother.

"This one time," Torr continued, "We got called on this businessman. He had a small clothing retail chain on Raltiir but his rival sicced us on him. We found no sedition, only that he was cheating on his wife with one of the shop-girls. By the end he and the shop-girl both got broken in an interrogation cell and his wife downed a mouthful of poison and never woke up. And there were worse cases. But that was the tipping point, the time I couldn't take it and defected."

"You had a moment of clarity."

"That's right." Torr softened his tone. "Have you?"

Fel looked down at his glass. He still hadn't drunk anything. "There were many times when I was forced to realize the hypocrisy of the Empire's actions. Isard setting my men up to die at Brentaal was the worst of it, through hardly the first. But you know I only defected once I was captured."

"So, no moment for you, then?"

Fel sucked in a breath. This conversation was getting more intimate than he'd expected. "I have clarity. And there's no reason to doubt my loyalties."

"I never did," said Torr, but Fel wasn't sure he believed him.

"I *am* loyal to the cause of the New Republic." Fel met his eyes. "I want to see the Empire fall. I want to see *Isard* fall."

Torr took a sip from his drink. "I believe you. But we've been dancing around some point this whole time, haven't we? I mean, you've got Imperial defectors in your own squadron. Plus, you don't have the reputation of a man who goes out of his way to make friends."

Fel acknowledged the truth with a nod. "I wanted to talk to you about my wife."

"I already told you, that's Cracken's people. I work for Drayson."

"You've been analyzing the data retrieved from Boudolayz, haven't you?"

"Part of it. There's a lot there and we split it into divisions. NRI's been on it too."

"I understand the files contain the most up-to-date Ubiquitorate records, correct?"

"That's the point of a data depository."

"I would like to know if those records contain any mention at all of Isard's attempts to track down my wife. No matter how minor."

Torr took another sip. His face didn't show a thing. "Have you asked Drayson or Cracken?"

"Commander Antilles has. They said there's nothing."

"Then there's nothing."

"I want to be sure."

Torr put his glass down. "You just said you were loyal."

"I am loyal to your cause. But I am also loyal to my wife. I've waited six months for NRI to find her and they haven't. I can't wait on them any more."

It felt good to actually say it, even though odds were good Torr would march right to Drayson and tell him of this whole conversation. Even if he did, Fel has nothing to lose. They needed his flying skills too much for them to pull him over an indiscretion like this. Yes, it has dishonorable to go behind their backs like this, but for his wife, he'd shoulder it.

When Torr didn't respond, he said, "After you had your 'moment of clarity,' what then? Did you just walk away from everything? Or did you leave anyone behind?"

Torr looked down at his drink. He picked it up and took another, longer sip. "My father was a hard New Order supporter. He'd have never understood what I was doing. I told Mom, but not him. After I defected, ISB went after them both. Naturally."

"And?"

"Mom confessed all she knew, which wasn't much. They let her go with a beating. But they were sure Dad knew more

than he did, which was nothing at all." He drank again. "They said he died of a heart attack during interrogation, but I'll never know."

"I'm sorry."

"I hated him." Torr put the glass down. "But he didn't deserve that. Dying in some cell for no bloody reason."

"No one deserves that."

Torr sighed. "It will take time to search. But I think I can access all the files."

"Thank you very much," Fel said. He didn't know what else to say. Torr stared down at his empty cup. Fel took up his own and, finally, drank.

CHAPTER NINE

CORUSCANT

The planning for the campaign against Zsinj went better than Grand Admiral Makati had expected. Isard was uncharacteristically willing to give him free reign in requesting ships, equipment, and personnel, including the elite 181st Fighter Wing that had seen only limited action since the defection of Baron Fel. When he submitted his final plan to her review, he'd braced himself for the usual series of line-by-line criticisms masked as suggestions. Instead, he received only a set of broad suggestions that, rather than working against his existing plan, fine-tuned certain points and perfected what had already been his aim anyway. It was almost like the review had been written by someone else entirely.

Makati had thrown himself so fully into his campaign planning that he barely had time for anything else. After receiving the review from Isard, it felt strangely relaxing to return to his penthouse, take off his uniform, take some brandy from F-4GR, and read over the fleet activity reports.

It was a big galaxy and there was a lot to report, so mostly he skimmed the entries. A lot of them reported skirmishes between Isard's forces and the Rebels. A Corellian corvette and a squadron of X-wings had been destroyed during an attempted raid at Paqualis, while an Imperial star destroyer and a few support ships had been captured by the Rebels during the retreat from Milagro. There were also reports, second-hand, of skirmishes along the border between Zsinj and Teradoc's territories, including rumors that Teradoc's Crimson Command had destroyed one of Zsinj's destroyers

at Belderone. Another note said that Jerec had moved *Vengeance* out of the Sullust System, current location unknown.

Makati was about to put the report down and look up blitz-ball scores when he saw a report from Boudolayz. The planet was out-of-the-way and lightly-populated, but it did have a Ubiquitorate data storage center. The Rebels hadn't attacked it until now, but they must have ferreted out its location.

He called up the full report and read it. Eight X-wing fighters had arrived, chasing a shuttle carrying ISB operatives into Boudolayz Orbital Station. The fighters eventually retreated, but not before blowing several large holes in the Boss, one of which had apparently killed the station's commander as well as the ISB agents, whose identities had never been officially verified. According to the report, they'd attempted to run in their shuttle and been vaporized by the X-wings right before they fled.

Something didn't smell right.

Makati contacted the Ubiquitorate and requested a full damage report from the attack on their facility. For a normal officer, that kind of request could have taken days, but Makati was a grand admiral, and he spent only ten minutes pacing in his study and fending off F-4GR's questions before he had the whole thing.

The report was thorough, as expected. Attempts had been made to analyze the debris left after the attack. *Mu*-class shuttle debris had been found in space, but there had already been two of those in the station's hangar when the rebels blew it open. The report noted that the fleeing shuttle had been hit at close-range with two proton torpedoes, but could not identify any of the shuttle debris conclusively. Nor had the corpses of the four human crew and two Bothan prisoners been identified. Bodies had been flushed into the vacuum during the attack and ruined by decompression, making them very difficult to identify, though by some stroke of luck, the station's commander, one Heimon Drayk, had been spared the torture of the vacuum. When the compartment he'd been in had been blown open, everything free-standing had been sucked into the vacuum except for Drayk himself. His body had been pulled beneath a console and stayed there, awk-

wardly wedged against the deck until rescue crews in vac suits examined the area.

Drayk's body had still been damaged by decompression, but medical examiners believed that the tear around his throat had been made by a sharp object, possibly shrapnel. The examiners took images of the dead man's body before and after his autopsy. Vacuum-bloated corpses were always ugly, but Makati forced himself to give Drayk's remains a look-over. His eyes naturally revolted at the horrific face and swiped downward, to his uniform. Then they locked on the dark liquid stain that stretched halfway across Drayk's chest. It looked like blood, but not human blood.

He wasn't sure what effects open space would have on body fluids, so he patched in a call directly to Boudolayz Orbital Station. It was almost midnight in Imperial City and the Boss's internal time was synced with the capital's. A very tired-sounding tech answered Makati's call, then became very attentive when she realized who she was speaking to. Five minutes later, Makati was talking with the chief medical examiner who had handled Drayk's corpse. Five minutes after that, the examiner stepped away, and ten minutes after *that*, the examiner reported that he had just tested the blood sample on Drayk's uniform. It was not human. It was Em'liy. Makati thanked the medic politely and shut off the connection.

"How very strange," F-4GR said behind him. It nearly made Makati jump from his chair. The droid, though, ignored his master's alarm and continued, "I'm sure no such alien was serving on the station's crew. Perhaps it was an escaped prisoner."

Makati made a mental note to contact the Boss about their detention center, but he was already near-certain what the answer would be. He shifted in his chair to face F-4GR and said, "There was no Bothan blood. And no Bothan corpses."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"When the battle started there was a shuttle with two stormtroopers, a human in ISB clothes, and two Bothans in stun-cuffs. After the battle there's no sign of any of them. Only blood from an Em'liy."

“Em’liy are large creatures, sir, but I believe one could fit inside a stormtrooper uniform, although it would be a tight squeeze.”

“Very clever.” Makati smiled against himself. “You have to give the Rebels credit where it’s due. They raided an Ubiquitorate data storage facility and almost got away with it.”

“Oh dear. If they have all the data from that base, they might have records of the requests you’ve been making about Bandomeer. They might even figure out where our next offensive will be.”

“I had the same thought.”

“But sir, what good would it do them? That planet is, for the moment, securely in Zsinj’s hands.”

“If it’s a tempting target for us, it will be tempting for them too.” Makati, suddenly full of energy, got to his feet and started to pace.

“A three-way battle at Bandomeer would be... Well, it would be very messy, sir.”

“You forget, Forger, the Rebels try to avoid a head-on battle when they can. Do you remember what happened to Syn at Kashyyk? He was fed intel by people claiming to represent Teradoc, offering assistance. Syn planned for backup but backup never came and he got obliterated by the Rebels. And Grunger and Pitta? I’ve analyzed all the records Grant took at Tralus. What Pitta did with his torpedo sphere, wiping out Grunger’s fleet, that should have been impossible. But he did it, and the only way I can see how is that he had a spy on *Aggressor* feed in him data on Grunger’s fleet, so he’d know exactly when and where to strike.”

“But sir, there is no proof that the Rebels were behind it. And Grand Admiral Grunger, well-”

“Grunger and Pitta killed each other, but someone helped them along. Just like someone helped kill Syn.”

“Sir... I don’t mean to be alarmist, but does that mean someone is after *you* as well?”

Makati took a deep breath. Of course the Rebels would be after him. He’d be stupid to assume otherwise.

But it felt different, *knowing*.

For a second he felt a trill of fear, and he thought about calling off the Bandomeer offensive. Then he pushed it aside.

The Emperor had made him a grand admiral and it wasn't because he shirked his duty whenever he got spooked. This was a problem but he could solve it. The Rebels might come for him but he could beat them. If he couldn't, he didn't deserve his white uniform.

"Sir," said F-4GR, "I hope you know I would sacrifice all my plating and circuits to keep you safe"

A sudden emotion took Makati; a little boy's love for his metal friend. He patted the droid on his battered shoulder and said, "I appreciate that, but if the Rebels try something like they did with Syn, I don't think you'll be much help."

"Nonetheless, sir, I hope you'll allow me to remain by your side."

"You belong no where else, Forger. But right now... I think I need help from elsewhere."

"And... where may that be, sir?"

Makati thought but said nothing. He could muster only a few options, none of them good, but if the Rebels were going to intervene at Bandomeer, they might be the only thing that kept him alive.

Qinla Saaris was used to having ISB customs agents skulking around his dock, but he could tell in a second that these guys were a different league entirely. There were two of them, both human, one with pink skin, the other brown. Both were dressed in the black uniforms intel agents wore, but without rank badges, which was a bad way to start.

Keeping his voice as calm as possible, Saaris asked, "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"We have question about a person of interest," Pinkskin said. He didn't introduce himself, but these kind of agents never did. That's what Saaris had heard, anyway. He'd made it through life without having major run-ins with Imperial authorities and he wanted this one to be as short as possible.

Brownskin said, "We believe the person in question boarded your transport yesterday morning."

"Really? And how do you know that?" That stared at him balefully. Cursing internally, he said, "Well, it doesn't matter. Can you give me a description? Human? Non-human?"

"We'd like to pull your passenger records for that trip," said Pinkskin. "You *do* register all outbound personnel in your computer, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course I do. It's required by law after all." He paused. Technically, legally, these guys were required to present a warrant before they searched his corporate records. He had a feeling this was the wrong thing to bring up.

He went over to the computer and brought up the passenger manifest lists. "You said yesterday morning, correct?"

"That's right," Brownskin nodded. "Where was the ship headed?"

"It was going up the Hydian, like all our transports. We run limited express services, so we stop at Corulag, Champala, Paqualis. Used to stop at Chandrilla and Brentaal, but, you know." He leaned forward and whispered, conspiratorially, "*Rebel scum.*"

Brownskin seemed unimpressed. "So your service stops at Paqualis?"

"Uh, no, sorry. Stops at Corsin, actually." He hadn't wanted to tell them about Corsin because it was *de facto* Zsinj's territory. Then again, if he was a law-abiding citizen who only heard what was on the official newsnets, he wouldn't know that. Then *again*, they'd know about Corsin anyway the second they looked at the passenger manifest.

Brownskin interrupted his chain of internal profanity by holding out a data-stick and saying, "Please, load every manifest for the past two days."

"I thought you just wanted... Oh, never mind. Of course, sir. You'll have them all."

Saaris tried very hard to keep his hand from shaking as he took the datacard, plugged it into his computer, and transferred the manifest catalog.

It only took a second. He handed it back to Brownskin, put on his best polite smile, and said, "Is there anything else you need, sir?"

"We'll let you know," Brownskin said, very ominously. He pocketed the chip, turned, and walked out of the room, Pinkskin right behind him.

He peeked through the window of his booth and watched them go. They'd been gone for a good five minutes before he finally stopped shaking.

"We'll let you know?" LaRone said as he and Brightwater stepped inside their ship "What were you trying to do, terrify the poor barve?"

"Just playing the part. Aren't we supposed to be creepy ISB agents or something?"

"It was like you were channeling- never mind." LaRone bit his lip. He still tried very hard not to think about the ISB agent he'd shot back on *Accuser*.

"Whats the score?" Grave stuck his head out of storage room down the main corridor, where he'd been going over the weapons stockpile the grand admiral had graciously supplied them.

"We got the data from the transit company," Brightwater took the datacard out of his pocket. "Now let's plug it in and see if Isard's tracer led us to the right place."

The three of them climbed the ladder up to the second deck, where Marcross was examining the galley. Quiller clambered down the ladder from the small cockpit on the third deck to join them. Quiller had never flown a MandalMotors ship before, but he said the basic control layout wasn't that different from their old Suwantek freighter.

Once they'd all convened in the galley, Marcross took the chip and plugged it into the room's main computer terminal. The display screen brought up a long list of names matched with destinations and times of registry.

"Fierfek," Grave muttered, "How are we supposed to make sense out of this?"

"Bring up the one from yesterday morning," LaRone told Marcross.

"Got it. Looks like... Oh, lovely. Eight hundred and fifty-two passengers."

"Can we get more on them besides names?"

"Let me see..." Marcross leaned in close and typed something into the console. "Okay, here we go. Links to the info from everybody's identicard. Includes name, species, height, sex-if-applicable, even planet of legal residence."

"Well, she's clearly going to be traveling with a fake ID," said Brightwater.

"They've got pictures too," said Marcross.

"That doesn't mean much. I'm sure she's changed her appearance. You know, cut her hair, maybe dye her skin. Probably get retinal lenses. She might even be disguised as another near-human species."

"Yeah, but her ident probably marks her as female. That's usually harder to hide."

"Might narrow it down a little," said Marcross. "What about height? That can't change too much."

"One-hundred sixty-two centimeters," Quiller said quickly.

They stared at him. He shrugged awkwardly. "Give or take."

Brightwater rolled his eyes. "You know her other measurements too?"

"No. Stop it. Don't make me sound weird."

"Yeah, don't want to give people the wrong impression."

Ignoring them, LaRone leaned over Marcross' shoulder and asked, "Does that help any?"

"We can filter the results, so actually yes. Now we can try going through the photo records."

Identocard photos were of notoriously poor quality, and the ones stored in Saaris Transport Limited's passenger database were no exception. Each image was two-dimensional, highly pixelated, and for some reason mono-chrome even though they should have been full-color.

But it was all they had to go on. They let Quiller lean in to get a better look as they flipped through the images, one after another.

They were almost through with the pile and LaRone's confidence was finally starting to dip when Quiller said, "That's it! That's her!"

They all peered over his shoulder for a better look. It was a human woman with dark cropped short, nothing like Wynssa Starflare's famous gold locks. Her eyes were brown and her expression dour.

"Are you *sure* that's her?" asked Brightwater.

"Yeah, I think I see it too," Marcross muttered. "The shape of the nose, and the cheekbones..."

"Didn't know you were a fan," LaRone said.

Marcross blushed, just a little. Quiller added, "Height checks out too. Says she's getting off at Corsin. End of the line. It's like the grand admiral said. She's trying to run from Isard even if it takes her into Zsinj's territory."

"Maybe," said Brightwater. "Or maybe she just bought the longest ride so she could throw people like us. You know, get off a Paqualis instead."

"There's no way we can know for sure," Larone shook his head. "We have to assume she's going to Corsin."

Brightwater patted his shoulder and said, "Let's go back. Saaris might have more on- what's she going as?"

"Reina Auveron," Quiller supplied.

"What kind of things?" asked Marcross.

Brightwater shrugged. "If we're lucky, bank account info, though I bet she paid with hard currency. He can at least tell us what she was wearing, what kind of luggage she had."

"Good idea," LaRone nodded. "The rest of you, start plotting a course. See if we can figure out the fastest, safest way to Corsin. I bet we can get there about the same time since we're not making extra stops."

He and Brightwater hurried out of the ships, back to the landing port. They barely remembered to tug their black ISB uniforms straight before going back into Saaris' office. When they stepped through the door, the Togruta was bent over the counter, talking to a pair of squat blue Mrlssi customers. When he saw LaRone and Brightwater his eyes almost popped out of his skull.

He recovered quickly, though, and ended his business with the Mrlssi with a polite smile. As the chattering little aliens left the room, Brightwater stepped forward. Saaris stood his ground and held the counter tight with both hands.

"Well," he smiled, businesslike, "What brought you two gentlemen back?"

"We'd like to question you further about a passenger. You registered her as Reina Auveron."

"I see. Well, give me a moment to check the register. It should refresh my memory..."

The Togruta scooted over to his computer and called up his records. LaRone saw his eyes go wide again. Saaris looked at

the two humans and said, "Yes. Yes, I do remember her. I... take it her name isn't Reina Auveron?"

"Did you suspect she was using a fake identicard?" LaRone shouldered next to Brightwater.

Saaris's head wagged back and forth. "Oh, no, definitively not. I'd have never allowed her on my transport if I did." He paused, then added, "The customs agents, they didn't stop her either. I mean, they inspected her case, but that's all."

"She had one case?" asked Brightwater. "Only one?"

"Yes, only one. Not a huge one either." He waved his hands, shaping a rectangle a meter wide in the air. "I thought that was... Well, a little unusual."

"In what way?"

He blinked. "I don't know. I just... did. What was *really* unusual, though, was that she didn't pay with a card."

"Credit chips?"

"That's right. She was going all the way to Corsin, which isn't a cheap trip. Most beings use cards for those kinds of purchases, you know."

LaRone exchanged looks with Brightwater, then asked, "Can you remember anything else? Or do I need to remind you of the penalty for abetting a fugitive?"

"No, no you don't. She said she was going to meet her husband on Corsin, but maybe that wasn't true." Saaris added, defensively, "There was no reason *not* to believe her. She didn't seem to be doing anything *wrong*. And I'd feel terrible, you know, harassing a pregnant woman."

"*Pregnant?*" Blackwater's surprise slipped through.

"Oh yes, definitely pregnant. Not just fat." The Togruta waved both hands in front of his own paunched belly. "She said she only had a month or two left before spawning."

LaRone ran through quick calculations in his head. She'd probably gotten pregnant just before Baron Fel went to Brentaal and got captured. He might not even know he was having a kid.

He had a feeling that was going to make things a lot more complicated.

Saaris continued, "She was wearing a dress, I remember that. A brown dress, plain and loose. And a black shawl over her shoulders. No jewelry, I don't think. Does that help?"

LaRone added sternness to his voice and said, "It suffices for now. We'll let you know if we need your... assistance again."

Saaris nodded dumbly as they walked out of the office.

"You have to admit," said Brightwater, "This *is* kind of fun."

"A little," LaRone sighed. "You want to tell Quiller his girlfriend's *spawning* or should I?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take the honor."

It was only a short jump from Coruscant to the garrison planet Anaxes, but it felt like he was leaving the Empire entirely. When Grand Admiral Makati's shuttle reverted to realspace, over a dozen *Imperial*-class star destroyers ringed a world with violet seas and blue-green continents. Not even Coruscant had this many defenders standing by, though by all rights it deserved to. As his shuttle curved around the planet's orbit, the super star destroyer *Whelm* slid into view. It was a beautiful grey-and-black dagger, nineteen kilometers long, bristling with weaponry, as deadly and graceful as its sister ship *Executor*.

To Makati, its beauty seemed like an insult.

His shuttle set down in *Whelm*'s auxiliary landing bay, which was still more vast and cavernous than any other ship's main hangar. Over a hundred stormtroopers stood at attention as he walked down the landing ramp. It was a fitting greeting for grand admiral, but it all felt hollow.

Admiral Feyet Kiez was there too. Azure Hammer Command had been Grand Admiral Teshik's until his death at Endor; then it had fallen to his second-in-command. Kiez was less than forty, trim and healthy, and while some said his promotions had come from family connections, Makati knew the man was a capable soldier. Once, a long time ago, Kiez has gotten his start as first officer on Makati's command ship.

Kiez snapped a salute and said, "It's an honor to have you aboard, sir."

"At ease, Admiral." Makati said. "I came here for a private conversation, not a parade."

"Of course. If you'll follow me, sir, we have a conference room prepared."

As Kiez led him past all those rows of white-armored soldiers, Makati wondered what the point of the show was. A sign of respect, perhaps, or maybe a bit of bragging on Kiez's part. No, the Kiez he'd known wasn't the braggart type. He did, however, know to show strength, and make his point clear without using words.

The choice in conference rooms was a case in point. Its forward viewport looked out toward *Whelm's* bow, some thirteen kilometers away. *Anaxes'* surface glowed to one side; more star destroyers glistened on the other.

"You must be very proud," Makati said as he sat down.

"We make sure the soldiers here are always alert. Regular full combat drills, intense training, all of it."

"You're battle ready, but you don't seem keen on fighting a war."

Kiez chuckled easily and dropped into the chair opposite Makati. "I know why you've come here, sir."

"You only know some of it. And don't call me 'sir.'"

"All right, then. Afsheen, you want this ship, don't you? Isard has some grand new offensive planned and she wants *Whelm* to be the centerpiece."

"The offensive is all mine. Isard only approved my plan."

"Surprising. In my experience, that woman is an insidious micro-manager, despite the fact that she doesn't know a damn thing about how to fight a war."

Makati couldn't bring himself to honestly object. Instead he said, "Kiez, I think the battle ahead is going to go three ways. *Whelm* would be a critical advantage."

"Three ways? You, the Rebels, and who? Zsinj? Teradoc? Jerec? Or does Isard want revenge on Krennel?"

"You can't expect me to spill my battle plan."

"All right. So you, the Rebels, and someone with a very big star destroyer?"

Makati gave the tiniest nod. That was telling enough.

"Well. I can see why you would want this ship."

"It's not just that, Feyet." Makati leaned forward. "What are you *doing* here? What's your plan? This is *Anaxes*. This garrison, is here for one purpose: to defend the Core."

"Exactly. If the Rebels breach the Core, my ships will be needed."

"The Rebels *have* breached the Core. They're sitting on Brentaal right now."

"No one asked for my help at Brentaal."

Makati gave a long, deep sigh. It was an open secret that Isard had let the Rebels take that world to humiliate Pestage as a prelude to deposing him. That might have won her the regent's throne but it didn't win her much love from the military. They also knew that the dirty, stupid games those schemers played with soldiers' lives had started long before Isard; she just happened to be better at them than most. On one level, Makati could understand Kiez's reluctance to join the greater battle.

But on another level, a deeper level, it was utterly indefensible.

Makati straightened himself and looked Kiez in the eye. "Do you really think Grand Admiral Teshik would have stayed here, sitting on his fleet while the Empire is struggling to survive?"

Kiez flinched. Kiez had stepped up to fill the gap Teshik left behind but they both knew he could never match the grand admiral's tactic genius. Apparently, Kiez couldn't match Teshik's resolute loyalty either.

"Teshik is dead," Kiez muttered. "The decision is mine now. I'm trying to do the best I can with what I have."

"I didn't come to beg, Feyet."

"You shouldn't be begging at all. You shouldn't be fighting for Isard. You're better than her."

"I'm not fighting for Isard! This entire galaxy is tearing itself apart. Hundreds of thousands of men in the same uniforms as ours just slaughtered each other at Tralus. Rebel anarchists are capturing entire *worlds*. Do you remember the Clone Wars, Kiez?"

"I was a child then." The admiral avoided his eyes.

"The Clone Wars ruined my world, and hundreds of others."

"I know that."

"Palpatine wasn't a perfect leader, but his death was a *disaster*. Endor let loose a wave of destruction that will ruin this galaxy. The Clone Wars will be *nothing* in comparison.

We have to stand against it. The center must be held. That is our duty, as soldiers of the Empire.”

“You can’t stop a wave, Afsheen. You have to ride it.”

“So what will you do, then? Sit here with your fleet and wait for the wave to come to you?”

“I’m not sending my men to die for Isard.”

“They’re not-” Makati stopped and shook his head. “I’m sorry. This is pointless, isn’t it?”

With sympathy, Kiez said, “You can stay here, if you’d like.”

“On *Whelm*?”

“It’s not like Isard’s in a position to come and take you back.”

“Frankly, Feyet, I’m surprised she hasn’t tried to kill you by now.”

“What makes you think she hasn’t?”

Makati opened his mouth, closed it. He shouldn’t have been surprised.

“You know I won’t stay with you,” he said at last.

“I do. But I wanted to make the offer.”

He looked out at the glowing planet, the gleaming star destroyers, the thirteen kilometers of stretched-out superstructure. With a fleet like this, taking Bandomeer would be easy. But he’d known it would never happen, even before coming here. He’d just wanted to see his friend and be rejected face-to-face.

Makati sighed and stood up. “I should be getting back to Coruscant. I have a campaign plan to finalize.”

“I’d prepared a meal.”

“Thank you, but... I don’t think I have the appetite.”

Kiez rose too. They stood on either side of the table, staring awkwardly across it. There was nothing to shake hands over, and there seemed nothing else to say. Makati turned for the door and Kiez followed. They walked back to the shuttle in silence.

CHAPTER TEN

HONOGHR

When *Grey Wolf* reverted to realspace, the planet sitting beneath left Captain Niriz markedly unimpressed. He was no expert in reading biomes, but even he could see this planet was sick. Most of its surface was a dark violet-brown color; the few large lakes and inland oceans on its surface were a muddy grey-blue. White cloud-wisps were sparse. He spotted only a few patches of land that looked healthy.

As usual, Thrawn hadn't explained why he'd taken them to this obscure system on the far edge of Hutt Space. Niriz hoped that now, at least, they'd get some answers.

The grand admiral was sitting in his command chair, white-gloved hands templed in front of him. What his red eyes saw when they stared out at the ugly world, Niriz had no idea.

"Sir," he asked, "Is there anyone you wish us to hail?"

"No need. Prepare a shuttle and a guard."

"You'll be going down there yourself?"

"Indeed. I'd like you to accompany me as well, Captain."

"I see." He looked back at the planet below. "I take it here are some inhabitants, sir?"

"On the small patches of inhabited land, yes. They'll prove quite valuable to us."

"It doesn't look like natural devastation."

"It isn't. This planet was once fertile. Then a vessel crashed here during the Clone Wars, ruining its ecosystem. The Empire has been managing things since then, but I wanted to pay a visit to make sure things are still on track, given everything else that's happened."

"Are we here for the planet, or the inhabitants?"

"Both. If we are not managing the situation on the planet well, the inhabitants won't be of any use to us."

Sometimes he really wished Thrawn would come out and say what he was talking about. "Who are these inhabitants, sir?"

"They're called the Noghri, Captain. I believe I've mentioned them before."

Niriz nodded, suddenly understanding. The Noghri were as skilled assassins as you could find in the galaxy, and they'd loyally served Darth Vader for decades. Several years before, Vader had passed command of the Noghri commandos to Thrawn in return for a favor. Now Vader was dead, and as for the Noghri, there was no telling whether their allegiance remained. The race supposedly held a deep sense of honor, but like everything in the galaxy lately, one couldn't depend on how things were *supposed* to work.

"Does Isard know about them, sir?"

"I'm sure she's aware. I've no indication that she's attempted to coopt their services in my absence, but we must be certain."

"Do you have a mission for them as well, sir?"

"The shuttle, Captain." Thrawn's voice tinged with impatience.

"Of course. Right away."

It took fifteen minutes for the crew to prepare a *Lambda*-class shuttle and a squadron of stormtroopers. Niriz handed command over to Lieutenant Virel and followed Thrawn onto the shuttle.

Once they entered the atmosphere, Honoghr only looked worse. They flew over a seemingly-endless wasteland of violet-brown grass, mixed with patches of chemically-polluted water. When they finally arrived at a patch of fertile land, Niriz felt almost relieved.

When the shuttle set down at the center of the village, Niriz understood why Thrawn hadn't bothered hailing them. The place was a shockingly primitive collection of wooden roundhouses and huts. Torches rather than glow-lamps flickered in the twilight gloom. As they marched down the landing ramp with their stormtrooper escorts, a cluster of

short, grey-skinned aliens gathered to watch them. Most had their bodies hidden beneath brown woven robes, and on first sight hardly looked like skilled assassins, but over the past four years Niriz had learned to look beyond first appearances, especially when it came to aliens. He saw the strong, long-fingered hands, the way the Noghri held their heads high and their feet spaced and staggered. He saw forearms knotted with muscle and eyes with vertical slits like a predatory katarn's.

The Noghri, some two dozen in all, stared at the newly-arrived Imperials. Thrawn was at the head of the column, and if he'd been expecting them to bow down in obeisance, he hid his disappointment when they did nothing of the kind.

When it became clear that the Noghri were waiting for an introduction, Thrawn spread his arms and said in Basic, "Your Imperial benefactors have arrived at last. Please, I wish to speak to your Maitrakh."

Niriz didn't know what that was, but it must have been a leader of some kind. The little grey-skinned aliens, however, kept staring wordlessly. Niriz wondered whether these creatures understood Basic at all. Their planet was clearly technologically backward, and it was probable they'd never had contact from the outside galaxy at all until the Clone Wars. Such a primitive species might have seen offworlders as gods, but if they'd been impressed by Darth Vader, they didn't seem to share that opinion of Thrawn.

There was a muttering from the back of the crowd. Niriz tensed. If these Noghri were truly as good at fighting as claimed, they should have brought more than a dozen guards.

The grand admiral raised his voice and said, "My name is Grand Admiral Thrawn. Command of the Noghri was passed to me by your savior, Lord Darth Vader, three years ago. I spoke with the Maitrakh of Clan Bakh'tor then and confirmed your loyalty. I wish to speak with her again. The Empire is calling on its debt."

There was a shuffling in the crowd, and one Noghri hobbled forward. Its hair was white and it used a long stick to help it walk. It looked up, blinked those vertical eyes, and said in thickly-accented basic, "I am Ovkhevam, Grand Admiral Thrawn."

"I require your Maitrakh. Where is she?"

"In the grand *dukha*, as always." Ovkhevam jabbed the tip of his cane toward what seemed to be the largest roundhouse in the village.

"Then take me too her." When no one moved, Thrawn added sternly. "I have come farther to be here than you can imagine. I am giving you an order as speaker for the Empire and Lord Darth Vader. I expect obedience. You owe the Empire a debt for its effort to rehabilitate your world. Will you defile your honor by ignoring me?"

"We know our honor," Ovkhevam said. Niriz caught a slight tremble in his voice. "And we know our obligation. Come. I will take you to the Maitrakh."

The crowd parted in the center, giving them room to pass. Niriz leaned in close to Thrawn and whispered, "He's uncertain. Defensive."

"Very good," Thrawn nodded. He threw a hand over his shoulder, flicking up two fingers. A pair of stormtroopers stayed with Thrawn and Niriz as they followed Ovkhevam, while the rest stayed with the shuttle.

"Do you know why?"

"I'm afraid I don't, Captain, but I'm as eager to find out as you."

It wasn't often that Thrawn admitted to being in the dark. Unfortunately, it didn't make Niriz feel any better. As subtly as he could, he placed the palm of his right hand on the butt of the service pistol holstered at his belt. He had no illusions that he could take one of Darth Vader's famed death commandos in a fight, but if it came, he didn't want to die without a weapon in hand.

The inside of the grand *dukha*, as Ovkhevam had called it, was a broad open space, sparsely decorated. It probably served as a gathering hall, perhaps for religious ceremonies or clan meetings, but at the moment it looked markedly empty. At the far side of the room was a low stage, and atop the stage was an empty throne.

Sitting at the base of the throne, so hunched and small that Niriz didn't notice it at first, was a Noghri even older than Ovkhevam.

"Maitrakh," Ovkhevam called, "The Empire has sent us a visitor."

The Maitrakh picked up its head and stared. "You are Grand Admiral Thrawn," it said in Basic. Its voice was rasping but sounded, to Niriz's ears, distinctly female.

"You know me. We have met before." Thrawn took two steps forward. One hand remained at his side, palm facing back, signaling for Niriz and the stormtroopers to stay where they were.

"We have," said the Maitrakh.

"You pledged your loyalty to me, as you did to Darth Vader. Does that loyalty not hold true? Or has your clan broken its honor?"

"We have broken nothing."

"Then why am I not being greeted as I deserve?" Thrawn let anger seep into his voice.

Ovkhevam glanced at his Maitrakh as though he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue. The Maitrakh straightened her back, though she remained seated before the throne. "You are from the Empire," she said, "And as such we owe you for your work restoring our land to plenty. But you are not Darth Vader."

"Darth Vader is dead. He passed command of your people to me. Do you deny either of those things?"

"We do not. We know Darth Vader is dead."

"Who told you Vader had died?" If Thrawn was as surprised by that as Niriz, he hid it well.

"The New Vader came to us nearly two years ago," the Maitrakh said. "He called a convention of all the clans and told us what had happened. He said he was the leader of the Empire now, and requested our obedience. We gave it to him."

Niriz has read the datafile on Honoghr before coming down here and knew that one year here was only two hundred standard days; in other words, not long after Vader and Palpatine had died.

"Who is this *New Vader*?" Thrawn added a sneer to the title.

"He came to us wearing black robes and bearing a sword of red light," the Maitrakh said. "He worked wonders as Darth

Vader did. He could move stones with his will, and touch the minds of the clan leaders.”

A Jedi, then. Some said the Rebels had a Jedi on their side, but the Emperor had employed a small cadre of tame Force-users as well, and one of them would be more likely to know about the Noghri.

“Lord Vader assigned you to *me*,” Thrawn insisted. “Did you hand over your honor to an interloper just because he *told* you to?”

“He told us you were dead,” Ovkhevam spoke up. “Slain, in the same great battle that killed Darth Vader.”

Now Niriz understood. These primitive beings couldn’t tell if they were seeing a god descended or a ghost resurrected.

“You can see that I am clearly alive,” Thrawn snarled. “Have you been serving him this past year?”

“Some of our commandos are in his service now,” the Maitrakh said. She bowed her head low to the floor. “Please forgive us, Lord. We did not know the New Vader was deceiving us. When he told us, we *all* believed.”

Force magic, most likely. Niriz had never seen a Force-user in his life and mostly been grateful for it; now he had a sinking feeling that his luck had run out.

“Did this New Vader give you a name?” asked Thrawn. “Or did you throw away your honor without his asking for it?”

“He only called himself New Vader,” the Maitrakh’s tone was almost apologetic.

“I recall his acolytes calling him ‘High Inquisitor.’” Ovkhevam added.

“Describe his acolytes,” said Thrawn.

The Maitrakh raised her head. “One had white skin, and long tails from his head. Another was a female, with short gold hair. A young one was with her. All of them had swords of light, just like Lord Darth Vader.”

“And this *New* Vader,” said Thrawn, “Did he see you with his eyes?”

“No. He had no eyes, but could see us still.”

Niriz was starting to feel sick in his gut. He’d never met the man the Noghri were describing, but there was only one person it could be.

"And you say he has commandos with him now?" Thrawn pressed.

"Yes, from different clans."

"If I find this *New Vader*, if I force him to admit his lies, will your people bear witness and recognize my rightful place as ruler of all Noghri?"

The Maitrakh and Ovkhevam exchanged glances before the old woman said, "I cannot speak for all clans. But Clan Bakh'tor will witness."

"Then select two witnesses to come with me now. Have them ready within the hour. I don't suppose you know where the impostor has taken them?"

"The stars are... vast and unknown to me."

"Very well. I will find him myself." Thrawn turned and looked at Niriz for the first time since getting off the shuttle. He said, loud enough for the others to hear, "Captain, let us return to the shuttle. If these Noghri do not prepare two witnesses to accompany us, we will raze the village."

Niriz swallowed. "Understood, sir."

"One hour," Thrawn repeated, then spun and marched for the door. It was all Niriz and the stormtroopers could do to keep up with them.

Niriz didn't attempt to talk to the grand admiral until they'd retreated inside the shuttle and closed the landing ramp, sealing them inside with eight stormtroopers while four more remained outside.

"I should have foreseen this," Thrawn said, voice betraying rare anger as he stood in the cockpit. "I should have taken efforts to preserve our presence on Honoghr and ensure the Noghri's obedience."

"Sir, there was no way you could have known the Rebels would kill Darth Vader."

"Perhaps not, but command of the Noghri was delegated to me, and me alone."

"Sir... How do you intend to find Inquisitor Jerec?"

Thrawn looked out the shuttle's viewport at the village. Small, brown-robed Noghri were moving about, giving the parked shuttle a cautious berth. When the grand admiral didn't answer, Niriz ventured, "Perhaps we should contact Director Isard. She may have an idea where he is."

"Jerec is currently pretending loyalty to Grand Moff Kaine of the Pentastar Alignment."

Niriz was about to suggest they approach Kaine, then held his tongue. Assuming the grand moff did know where Jerec was, he wouldn't be likely to give information on his ally to Thrawn.

"But you are right, Captain," Thrawn said with a restrained sigh. "Isard likely has military intelligence keeping an eye on Jerec."

"How do you intend to get the Noghri back from him, sir?"

"I am... considering that." Thrawn's red eyes narrowed. "Have you ever met the High Inquisitor, Captain?"

"No sir." He didn't say he was glad he hadn't.

"He was a Jedi, back when there *were* Jedi. He threw his lot in with Palpatine, of course, but his only allegiance has always been his own design. The Emperor sent us on several missions together. He wanted someone looking over Jerec's shoulder."

An ambitious Force-user, then. Lovely. "It sounds as though he's gathered followers, sir."

"He has."

"Do you have any idea what he might have been using the Noghri for?"

"I can think of many possibilities. Jerec has not tried to carve out territory like the other warlords. He has a different design."

"A... Jedi design, sir?"

"Quite likely."

Thrawn stared pensively out the window. To fill the awkward pause, Niriz cleared his throat "I've never met any Jedi, sir. Is that they say... true?" he finished lamely.

"Jerec is a very powerful being. I have no doubt he used the Force to affect the minds of the Noghri clan leaders into giving him their allegiance."

"So you've experienced his power first-hand?"

"His... And other Jedi's." Thrawn's eyebrows drew together. "Some have suggested that the Force brings madness to those who use it. Given my experience with their kind, I have always thought that possibility... quite likely."

"Can we use that to our advantage, sir?"

Thrawn turned to fix Niriz with his red glare. "I believe it is the only option we have."

At the hour's end, three Noghri approached the shuttle. The ramp was lowered, and Thrawn and Niriz walked out with their stormtrooper escorts.

The Noghri in the lead was Ovkhevam. The old creature bowed, then raised his head and said, "These are Clan Bakh'tor's witnesses, Ekhrikhor and Akharan. They are two of our best warriors and will serve the Empire well."

"I welcome them aboard," Thrawn said, voice softer than before. "I assure you, when they return to Honoghr they will tell you that I have only said the truth."

Ovkhevam bowed his head again, but made no reply.

Thrawn waved Ekhrikhor and Akharan forward. The two Noghri bowed, then threw brown hoods over their heads and walked up the ramp.

Once everyone was inside, the shuttle ramp closed and the craft prepared for liftoff. The Nohri were placed on crash seats in the rear hold while Thrawn and Niriz joined the shuttle's two pilots in the cockpit.

As they watched Honoghr's ugly surface fall beneath them, Niriz leaned close to Thrawn and said in a low voice, "You told them that the Empire is working to reclaim their polluted land. Is that true?"

"We've had agriculture droids working the soil for the past two decades," the grand admiral said.

Niriz frowned. If they'd been making progress, he didn't see any of it. Then realization found him. "You've been poisoning their world."

"Their world was already poisoned. We've merely been making sure it remains that way."

"While keeping the Noghri in indentured servitude forever."

Thrawn nodded once.

"If the Noghri found out it... Well, I don't think their sense of *honor* would approve."

"It wouldn't, which is why they never will. They're good fighters but primitive, technologically and mentally. A simple ag-droid is like a divine mystery to them."

Their shuttle started to rock as they exited the atmosphere. As Niriz gripped his seat-rests tight, Thrawn leaned close and said, "Are you troubled by this deception, Captain?"

"It seems a little risky, sir."

"What we're doing is hardly cruel. You must understand that honor and combat are at the center of Noghri life. They live to serve, and to serve with their knives. What we are giving them is a chance to fight, and possibly die, in service of a noble cause. Ekhrikhor and Akharan, and all the other Noghri death commandos, follow a higher calling in the Empire's service than they ever could have done in petty clan wars on Honoghr."

"You make it sound like we're doing them a favor."

"I doubt they'd agree, but I believe we are. We are all here to serve a greater design, Captain. You. The Noghri. And me."

His voice had taken on a tone of uncharacteristic reverse. As the shuttle cleared the atmosphere and soared toward *Grey Wolf*, he asked, "What design is that, sir?"

"What else?" Thrawn gave the tiniest shrug. "A strong, stable, ordered galaxy in which every being has a place. Every one of us. And we must be willing to make whatever sacrifices and take whatever steps are necessary in service of that goal."

Niriz couldn't deny the conviction in Thrawn's voice. He felt strangely blessed to that the grand admiral had confided this to him, here and now, but deep down, he knew it was something Thrawn had already taught him a long time ago.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ORD BINIIR

When Octavian Grant's star destroyer reverted to realspace over Ord Biniir, he saw exactly what he'd been expecting to see: one grey-and-black super star destroyer orbiting a verdant green-and-blue planet. Grand Moff Kaine was holding this conference far away from his *de facto* capital at Sartinaynian, but he was still determined to put on a good show.

He heard Captain Bremel suck in breath as *Oriflamme* vectored toward the magnificent *Reaper*. Grant looked over his shoulder and asked, "Impressed, are you, Captain?"

"I've never seen a ship like that, sir." Remembering *Aggressor*, he added, "Not up close."

"Today, that vessel means us no harm," Grant said. He believed that was true, but he wasn't quite certain. Not as certain as he wanted to be anyway. When Grand Admiral Teshik had failed to please his emperor, Palpatine had sent the man on a suicide mission against the Hapans. Only hideous cyborg grafts had kept Teshik alive, and after that he was more machine than man. Isard was not as nakedly sadistic as Palpatine, but she was clearly displeased with Grant all the same.

"Admiral," Bremel reported, "We're being hailed by *Reaper*. They say you're welcome to come aboard."

"Then tell my shuttle to warm its engines. I'll be down shortly."

"Do you want a fighter escort, sir?"

Grant through a moment, then shook his head. "Kaine knows what we can do, and we know what Kaine to do. I dare say he has a decisive advantage."

"That's true, sir."

"And as I said, he means us no harm. Not today."

By the time Grant reached *Oriflamme's* hangar, the shuttle was ready to go. It was a short five-minute glide into *Reaper's* far vaster landing bay. As he stepped onto the flight deck he took note of the other vessels aboard. There were full squadrons of TIE fighters in their racks, as expected, but the flight deck also contained less-common Incom Howlrunners and SoroSuub Preybirds, plus several shuttlecraft of unfamiliar design. Clearly, Kaine was having to shore up his forces with non-standard equipment.

The grand moff was not there on the landing deck to greet Grant. Instead, a half-squad of stormtroopers escorted him down grey hallways and onto the railcar that whisked them all the way to the command section in the aft of the massive super star destroyer. The ride only took a few extra minutes, and after that, Grant was sent up a lift tube to the bridge.

Kaine was putting on a show, in his way, by letting Grant see the insides of a clean, fully-staffed super star destroyer. Grant had never been a fan of supersized warships himself; they were ungainly and they drew enemy attacks like a supercharged magnet, as *Executor* had found out at Endor. Kaine was not a military man by inclination; he was drawn toward politics and governance, and rather than show off *Reaper's* killing capacity, he was displaying what a well-run, efficient operation looked like.

Grant had to admit he was just a little envious.

Kaine greeted him on the bridge. The grand moff was some five years younger than Grant, half a head taller and twenty kilos heavier, though his thick frame was still more muscular than fat. Kaine shook Grant's hand instead of saluting, then gestured to the fully-staffed bridge laid out before them.

"What do you think Octavian?" Kaine said. "Have you ever seen a more beautiful ship?"

"Beauty is in the beholder's eye, as they say. But she is impressive."

"I thought you'd agree. Reluctantly." Kaine smirked. "Come, let's talk in my office."

Grant knew that Kaine preferred to run his operations from his homeworld, but his quarters on *Reaper* were well-appointed as well, elegant without being gaudy. He bid Grant sit down on one side of his desk while he poured two glasses of some shimmering gold liquid.

Grant sniffed it, waited for Kaine to take a sip, then tried it himself. It was like wine but richer, not quite brandy-strong. He'd never had it before, and in his forty-year naval career, Grant had made a point to sample spirits from a great many places.

"It's from Sartinaynian," Kaine explained. "We rarely export."

"I've never made it to your homeworld, I'm sorry to say. Never had a reason to swing by."

Kaine smiled politely, but Grant knew his barb had stung. Arduus Kaine had a good pedigree, but he was still a man from the Outer Rim, and it had been difficult for him to mix with all the old families from the Core and Expansion Regions. Still, he'd made a fine effort and was generally of sounder mind than most of Palpatine's hangers-on, so Grant had taken a liking to him. He'd been disappointed when Kaine was posted to the Outer Rim to replace Grand Moff Tarkin, but the man had clearly turned it around to his advantage.

"I was surprised Isard sent you," Kaine admitted.

"I think this was her idea of punishing me. You heard about Tralus?"

"Of course. Were you supposed to intervene, stop Grunger and Pitta from slaughtering each other?"

"What Isard really wanted was Grunger's flagship."

"Ah. The *Aggressor*."

"She's envious of you and Zsinj, having ships like these. I can't say I blame her. She wants to show strength. She may hold the Core, but it's still hard to position herself as Palpatine's legitimate successor when other people more impressive war machines."

"We're lucky to have *Reaper*," Kaine said, "But the rest of our fleet is... somewhat lacking."

“And is that why you wanted to open negotiations? Come out of your shell?”

“Partially.”

“This isn’t a galaxy that lets men stay isolated. Admiral Kiez, on Anaxes, thinks he can sit tight and ride out the war, but sooner or later he’s going to have to make a choice on what to do with his garrison. And so will you.”

Kaine smirked. “Octavian, you’re too blunt to be a good diplomat.”

“I never wanted to be. I wanted to be what I am, a good soldier.”

“Isard doesn’t seem to think so.”

“Isard knows nothing about warfare.”

“But you fight for her. Why?”

“What should I do instead? Try carving out my own empire? All the good planets are taken.”

It was a flippant evasion, and they both knew it. Kaine leaned forward. “Octavian, I’m trying to make my territory self-sufficient, and part of that is building a bulwark against anyone who might threaten me. That includes the Rebels, it includes Zsinj, and it even includes Isard. I have a fine ship here but what I really need is a fine commander.”

Grant narrowed his eyes. “Are you offering me something?”

Kaine sat back in his chair and spread his hands.

Grant snorted. “You’re offering me *Reaper*? And how do you know I wouldn’t bomb Sartinaynian with it, take your place?”

“Because you don’t want to govern, Octavian, you want to fight.”

“Isard would disagree with you.”

“The fact that she sent you all the way out here means she’s intent on wasting your talents. I wouldn’t.”

“As I understand it, you’re going to great lengths not to fight anyone with this- what do you call it again?”

“The Pentastar Alignment.” Grant knew that, but he’d wanted to make Kaine say it.

Grant gulped another mouthful from his glass and said, “I appreciate the flattery and I’ll take it under consideration.”

“That’s all I ask,” said Kaine.

In truth, he *would* consider it. Grant wasn't like Makati. He wasn't clinging to any stupid idea of the Empire as some kind of peacekeeping force. He'd been a vice admiral when the Republic became an Empire and he'd seen all the ugly sides of the transition, the way officers climbed over the knife-stabbed backs of their former allies in order to please Palpatine. Not that he was better than them, or apart from them; he'd done plenty of things his noble family would have been aghast at. He was simply honest about it.

"With that in mind," said Kaine, "We should probably go down and join the others. I just wanted to speak privately before we began."

Grant frowned. "Others?"

Kaine rose from his chair. "Of course."

Grant just stared.

"Oh," Kaine said, "She didn't tell you, did she?"

"Tell me *what*?"

"When I called this conference I didn't just ask for someone from Isard's government. I want to lay down a firm groundwork guaranteeing the stability of my territory against its neighbors. I asked Zsinj and Teradoc to send representatives also."

Grant reared to his feet. "*What*?"

Apologetically, he added, "I've also asked the Rebel Alliance for a delegate."

"There are *terrorists* on this ship?"

"I'm sorry, Octavian, I thought you knew."

"No." He ground his teeth. "It seems Isard... neglected to mention it."

"I see," Kaine said, awkward and understanding. "Well, as I said, we shouldn't keep them waiting. Come, let's go."

Grant fumed in silence the entire ride down. This was worse than being shot up by Hapans. Isard had sent him, a grand admiral appointed by Palpatine himself, to sit in on petty talks with a bunch of scheming warlords' minions and rebel trash. It was beyond insulting, it was outright abusive. Meanwhile, Makati was back on Imperial Center, planning some campaign which would surely win him accolades and Isard's unwavering trust.

When he calmed down, he decided, he'd definitely give Kaine's offer consideration.

When he reached the conference room and saw the other delegates he was tempted to just walk out. The rebels had sent a squat, furry Bothan who called himself Tresk Im'nel. And of course it would be a Bothan; the debacle at Endor was over a year old and those anarchists were still intent on rubbing Imperial noses in what their spies had done.

Teradoc's delegate was almost understandable. Grant had known Temius Holt in the past. Born and raised on Anaxes to one of the Empire's most honorable military families, Holt had elected to sign on for intelligence work instead. He'd gained a reputation as a rogue, prone toward behavior unbecoming either an officer or a gentleman, and after Endor he'd vanished from the Ubiquitorate. Apparently he'd found a place at Teradoc's side.

The biggest insult, though, was the massive, bloated worm that introduced itself through its translator droid as Teubbo the Hutt, economic advisor to Grand Admiral Zsinj. Not Warlord, not High Admiral or Great Moff or Pompous Blubbering Upstart, but *Grand Admiral*.

Kaine somehow managed to get through the introductions with a straight face. They'd always said Kaine was soft on subhumans, probably because of his Outer Rim upbringing, but this was too much. He actually seemed to *respect* the furball and the slug, or at least did a terrifyingly good job of faking it.

"There are military considerations to take into account," Kaine was saying. "I believe that it is imperative we take steps to prevent any unwanted conflict at our borders."

The Hutt rumbled something, after which its droid said, "Wise Teubbo would like to remind you that borders, like everything else in this galaxy, are in a constant state of flux."

If Kaine noticed the anguish Grant was in, he pointedly ignored it. "I take your point, Wise Teubbo, but there are exceptions to every rule. I called this conference because I am *not* expansionist. I have no desire to take systems from anyone else in this room. I want to be left alone. I am trying to acquire some guarantee of that. And as you can all tell, I am very capable of defending myself if provoked."

“This is an impressive ship,” Holt said as he leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “I’ll give you that. But didn’t you also have a hand in funding another ship? The *Vengeance*, wasn’t it? For High Inquisitor Jerec.”

Kaine fought a frown. “What of it?”

“I was just wondering where Jerec and his ship are. You *did* bankroll that big black sword of his. I assume you’d keep track of that kind of investment.”

“Do you expect me to explain my entire defensive posture to you, sir?”

The Hutt interrupted with another rumble, and the droid said, “Brilliant Teubbo would like to remind you all that Grand Admiral Zsinj is also quite capable of defending his own territory.”

It was all Grant could do to keep from groaning aloud. Still, as the talk went on, as he sat there and watched the furball, the slug, and the spy bicker while Kaine looked stolidly on, he found a strange consolation.

If *these* were his opponents, perhaps he had a future after all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BANDOMEER

The first eight hours of the seige of Bandomeer went exactly according to plan. First, the star destroyer *Steadfast* decanted from hyperspace in the planet's outer orbit, followed one torpedo sphere, the *Enforcer*-class pickets *Carida* and *Prefsbelt*, and the interdictor cruisers *Claw* and *Constrainer*. Bandomeer's defensive shields went up within minutes, before the torpedo sphere any of the newcoming vessels dropped low enough into orbit to begin a planetary bombardment.

From the bridge of *Steadfast*, Grand Admiral Makati began broadcasting his statement on all frequencies. He ordered the local government of Bandomeer to declare its loyalty to Ysanne Isard, true regent of the Empire, and lower its shields. If they did this, no one on Bandomeer would be punished.

No response came, but Makati hadn't been expecting one. Regardless of who had controlled the planet's defenses before, they were Zsinj's men now. As the torpedo sphere dropped into lower orbit to begin bombarding Bandomeer's shields, three more massive warships dropped out of orbit: the *Bellator*-class destroyer *Aurora* and two more *Imperial*-class ships, *Peremptory* and *Vanguard*. Accompanying them were a dozen *Star Galleon*-class cargo frigates, four *Lancer*-class anti-starfighter frigates, and two Loronar strike cruisers. Less than a minute later, the interdictors brought up their gravity wells, effectively preventing any vessel from jumping in or out of hyperspace anywhere within the inner half of the Bandomeer system.

The message was clear. Grand Admiral Makati had come for prepared for a long haul.

The torpedo sphere continued to bombard the planetary shield, as did *Aurora*, *Peremptory*, and *Vanguard*, though cracking through the planet's defenses was not their main goal. Mostly, their torpedo and turbolaser barrages were there to test the strength of the shielding system. It proved quite resilient; as the Ubiquitorate had reported, Zsinj had upgraded defenses after claiming the world.

Steadfast hung back while the star galleons began to spread out over Bandomeer's upper orbit. The star galleon was designed as a heavily armored troop carrier, but these vessels had been modified for a different purpose: deploying proton mines. Minelaying was a dangerous business, and it had to proceed carefully and slowly. With the interdiction field in place, there was no danger of Zsinj dropping out of hyperspace and surprising them, so the mine-laying crews could get to work with the assurance that they were safe from everything except their own bombs.

The galleons began laying down their mines on opposite sides of Bandomeer's orbit. Their mine-grids became walls that blocked off the points where ships traveling Rimeward or Coreward along the Hydian Way would come out of hyperspace. Zsinj would certainly be sending his reinforcements from Serenno, Celanon, or one of his other fortress worlds up the Hydian, and the minefield would force him to stop and rearrange his ships outside the Bandomeer system.

And Zsinj would be coming. Makati had no doubt about that. He knew the planet would not simply surrender to him; he knew it would call for help, and that Zsinj would be forced to either answer or surrender a critical world in addition to his pride.

Eights hours into the siege, the galleons had built impressive walls on either side of the planet. It made Makati uneasy as he paced *Steadfast's* command deck. He hadn't sat down or left the bridge since the siege began, though his feet were getting sore, his shoulders tired, his crew restless. There was no telling how long they'd have to wait before Zsinj showed up, and it was very likely that the longer they waited, the more powerful a force the warlord would bring with him.

Around the time when eight hours rolled into nine, Makati received a visitor on the bridge. Colonel Turr Phennir appeared in his flight suit: black with red blood-stripes down either flank, patches for the 181st Imperial Fighter Wing on either shoulder.

Phennir was a young man, but his lean angular face and the scar slanting from his upper lip across his cheek made him look old and experienced. The pilot clacked the heels of his boots and snapped a salute; Makati waved him at ease.

"Is there a problem, Colonel Phennir?" The grand admiral asked calmly as they stood at the fore of the deck, where he'd been watching the star galleons creep through their work.

"Not a problem, sir. A question."

Makati raised an eyebrow. "A question that you felt you had to ask in person instead of via comm from the flight deck with your pilots?"

Phennir didn't wince at the rebuke. He didn't apologize either. "Sir, I wanted your approval to begin flying fighter patrols."

"*Aurora* and *Peremptory* already have TIEs escorting the minelayers."

"I understand, sir. However, Warlord Zsinj may appear at any time. We have to be ready."

"Are your pilots getting sleepy as they wait?"

Again, he didn't flinch. Impressive. "My pilots are always ready, sir. That's why I wanted to rotate squadrons on patrol. Whenever Zsinj *does* come, we'll already have twelve fighters in space."

It wasn't bad reasoning, but having twelve interceptors out for a few extra minutes wouldn't turn the tide of this battle, even if they did have the Empire's best pilots behind them.

Instead of answering Phennir's request, Makati looked out the viewport. He said, "Colonel, this is your unit's first major combat mission since Brentaal, isn't it?"

That name, *Brentaal*, seemed to give Phennir pause. To some that name meant the first Rebel victory in the Core, to others the first Imperial defeat. To Phennir, though, it could only mean the place where his mentor, Baron Fel, was captured by the enemy.

"We've been sent on other missions, sir," Phennir said at last. "But none as critical as this."

"I thought as much." He looked back to Phennir and saw him wilt, just a little, under the combined pressure of the grand admiral's glare and the memory of defeat.

"Do you have another question for me?" asked Makati, aware he hadn't answered the first.

"In the initial briefing, sir, you said the rebels might try to intervene here. Do you believe that's still the case?"

Makati took a few steps forward, to the very edge of the deck. He tapped a finger on the transparisteel viewport, beckoning Phennir to step closer. When the pilot was at his side, he pointed to the system's primary, white and bright over the curve of Bandomeer's shoulder.

"We can't quite see it from this angle," Makati said, "But between Bandomeer and its star is the planet Envos. There's a rebel fleet hiding there, using the radiation from the gas giant to mask its own thrust emissions."

"Are you certain? Have you sent scouts?"

"If I sent scouts the rebels would see them and they'd know I'd know. No, I didn't sent scouts. What I did do is request data from the astrological institute on Mrlssi, specifically the collected readings of Envos' natural radiation, taken from ships orbiting Bandomeer. Using those normal readings as a control, and comparing them to what our passive scanners are picking up now, we can assume the rebels have amassed around a half-dozen large warships behind that planet."

Phennir stiffened. "That's... quite a fleet."

"Indeed."

"Are we going to... Flush them out, sir?"

"Colonel, even if Zsinj isn't here himself, you can be sure he's watching our actions. If we engage the Rebels in a fleet battle, he'll be sure to jump in and savage us both."

"We can't just let the Rebels stay there."

"Why not? When they attack, we'll know where they're coming from."

"I suppose you're right," Phennir frowned. "To be blunt, sir, I like to be the one surprising my enemies, not the other way around."

"We just need to keep them in mind, and not show our backs to them."

Phennir clearly wasn't convinced, but he wasn't going to argue either.

"Colonel," asked Makati, "Do you have a *third* question?"

He hesitated, but only for a moment. "Sir, is there any indication, maybe from the Ubiqtorate, that Rogue Squadron is with them?"

"I'm afraid we don't know where Rogue Squadron is. We can't deny the possibility."

"I see, sir."

"Colonel, will it be a problem for you if they are?" It hadn't been announced publicly, or even to the rest of the 181st, but Phennir knew that Baron Fel was flying for the Rogues now.

Phennir's scarred lips set a straight line. "No, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. Dismissed."

Phennir clacked his boots and snapped a salute. As he lowered it, Makati, said, "As to your first question, you may begin flying sorties, one squadron at a time. I'll leave patrol routes and shift timing to you."

"Thank you very much, sir." Phennir snapped back into a salute, held it for a second, then relaxed again. Makati watched him spin and go, and when he was gone, the grand admiral turned his attention back to Bandomeer, the mines, and the destroyers in low orbit, still sporadically probing the planet's defenses. The men on those ships knew as well as anyone that this battle for Bandomeer wasn't going to be won on the planet. It would be determined high above.

He allowed himself a small sigh. If Zsinj kept him waiting much longer, Makati would be forced to roll out a welcome mat. But as long as this lasted, he needed to keep on his toes. He plucked his comlink from his breast and thumbed it on.

"Forger, are you standing by?"

After a second, his protocol droid's tinny voice replied from his personal cabin, "Standing by, sir."

"I'd like a cup of black caf, extra strong. Can you bring that to the bridge for me?"

"Of course, sir."

"Thank you. And Forger?"

“Yes, sir?”

“I’d like a single shot of Rycanthian whiskey mixed in.”

“Very good, sir.”

Makati turned off his comlink and put it back in his pocket. He turned, faced the viewport, and got back to waiting. He had a feeling it would be a while yet.

The New Republic task force clustered in low orbit over Envos, revolving around the planet at a slow speed so that the world always hid them from view of Bandomeer. They did, however, plant a temporary sensor emplacement on the dark side of Envos’ third moon, which circled its planet slowly and always faced the outer planets. Small and completely undetectable from Bandomeer itself, the sensor station bounced its findings off another orbital buoy to the flagship of the Republic fleet, where its senior command staff watched the siege play out in real time.

Admiral Burke’s command ship was *Emancipator*, one of several Imperial star destroyers captured at the Battle of Endor. Along with a quartet of Mon Calamari MC80 cruisers and a handful of assault frigates, gunships, and corvettes, it had been situated behind Envos for the past three and a half standard days. The arrival of Grand Admiral Makati’s task force hadn’t sent its crew scrambling to red alert; on the contrary, not a single soldier on sleep cycles was roused from his bunk. Crews were placed on standby alert, but shifts continued as normal for the majority of the beings in the Republic fleet.

Wedge Antilles was not one of them. The moment *Steadfast* dropped into Bandomeer’s orbit, he’d joined Admiral Burke on *Emancipator*’s bridge to watch the siege gradually unfold.

After ten hours, it was pretty clear what Makati’s plan was. With the main entry routes to Bandomeer blocked by minefields, Zsinj would only have a limited number of zones from which he could attack. Makati planned to hold him at those choke points.

“It’s a smart plan as far as it goes,” Burke was saying as he and Wedge examined the tactical holo. “Pretty much what I’d have used.”

"Couldn't Zsinj just try to blast his way through the minefield?" Wedge asked. "If he *does* bring *Iron First*, he'll have enough firepower."

Burke shook his head. "It would still take him hours. They're doing a real professional job there. Those mines are hard to target with turbos, and they're laying them far enough apart that one going off won't set off a chain. Snufighters could get through okay, and a really good crew *might* be able to fly a corvette through that minefield without hitting anything, but I'm sure these mines have IFF proximity sensors too."

"Anything unfriendly gets within blast range, *boom*."

"Exactly. It's a very smart set up."

Wedge wasn't exactly feeling better about their odds. "The way the mines are placed, Zsinj might end up getting between us and Makati. What happens then?"

Burke bit his lip. "I'd be happy to take down Zsinj too, but the grand admiral is our primary target today."

He sighed. "I can't say I'm happy with all these variables, Admiral."

"I'm disappointed. They say you're a maverick, Antilles."

Wedge allowed a slight smile. "I can be, sir, but I prefer it when I surprise somebody else instead of the other way around."

"That's the goal for today. We just have to be patient."

Wedge wanted to say he'd *been* patient, waiting for NRI to get back to him about Syal. He'd checked in with Cracken against right before going on this mission and gotten a negative response. He wasn't surprised, but he was disappointed. He'd tried to force Syal out of his mind, just like he'd almost forgotten about her for years after their parents' death, but now, with Baron Fel around, nebulous childhood memories of her kept coming back. They kept on getting in his head when he should have been focusing on the mission.

"General?" Burke said. "I asked you a question."

Like right now. Wedge stiffened. "I'm sorry, sir, what was that?"

"I asked if you've told your newest pilot that the One-Hundred-Eighty-First is aboard Makati's flagship."

Military intel hadn't been able to get much about Makati's battle plans, but they had learned that the 181st Fighter Wing under Turr Phennir had been relocated to *Steadfast*.

"Yes, sir. I've told him."

"And how did he take it?"

"He took it, sir. Said it wouldn't interfere with his mission."

Burke nodded, curtly. He seemed satisfied and turned his attention back to the minelayers' slow progress on the holo. Wedge himself wasn't entirely sure he believed his brother-in-law, but he knew better than to question him. All good fighter pilots learned to put aside outside considerations like old sentiments, old loyalties, and old memories. Burke had been a fighter wing commander once and understood that; it was why he'd accepted Wedge's answer so easily. A fighter pilot had to live in the moment, on sensation and reflex. Normally Wedge was good at it, and Fel was probably even better.

He looked over the tactical holo again, at the red wedge marking Makati's flagship. He hoped all of them would be able to do it today.

"I know it's here somewhere," Tycho said. Dressed in his orange flightsuit like the rest of the Rogues, he was on his hands and knees with his butt in the air, crawling around the floor of the barracks room where all nine Rogues were bunked.

Soontir Fel generally thought his executive officer a serious man, and didn't know what had possessed him to go slinking around on the deck when they could be called into combat at any moment. When asked what he was looking for, Tycho had been evasive. Right now, Hobbie and Nrin were standing over him looking confused, Xarce and Feylis were leaning against the far wall looking equally confused, Avan stood anxiously in the doorway like he was waiting to sprint for the hangar, and Wes Janson sat cross-legged on his bunk with a stupid grin on his face.

"Is this some sort of inventive new exercise, Tycho?" Janson asked. "You look like you're getting some good lower back stretches in."

"That's not it," Tycho said as he stuck his head beneath the cheap metal-frame bunk Fel was currently sitting on. Like a lot of things on this Republic vessel, it was identical to equipment still found on every Imperial warship.

"Then what *is* it?" Nrin sounded exasperated.

"I told you guys, this ship used to be called *Accuser*," Tycho said. His voice became muffled as he stuck his shoulders and upper back under the bunk-frame too.

"We *know* that," said Hobbie. "Some of us helped capture her at Endor, remember?"

"The point is..."

Tycho trailed off. After a few seconds, Janson asked, "Are you dead, Tycho? Did you suffocate down there?"

Without warning, Tycho scooted backwards out from beneath the bed. When he came out he patted dust out of his sandy-brown hair and turned his excited eye on Fel. "Get off. We've got to move it."

Fel still didn't know what was going on, but there was no point in argument. He got up and moved over to where Feylis and Xarce were standing. Tycho, Janson, and Nrin took hold of the double-level bunk-frame and pulled it away from the wall. Its old metal feet scraped nosily across the deck as it moved.

"There!" Grinning, Tycho pointed to something at the base of the wall. "I knew it'd still be there. If they didn't swap out the furniture they wouldn't redo the paneling either."

"What am I looking at?" Nrin squatted down. "I see... scratch-marks. Knife-marks, maybe, in the wall."

"Exactly." Tycho planted his hands on his fists, triumphant. "I told you, this used to be *Accuser*. This was my first post when I got out of the Imperial Academy."

Now it was starting to make sense. Frowning, Hobbie asked, "You used to bunk in *this* room?"

"Hell of a coincidence, isn't it? I wasn't entirely sure, because it's been a while, and you know all these barracks look the same, but I thought it might be. And there's the proof."

Janson whistled. "Fresh from the academy and you were already expressing your rebellious side with acts of petty vandalism. I love it. What does it say, Nrin?"

The Quarren squinted. "All I see are... a rough-carved circle... and the letters 'T' and 'N'."

"I give up," said Feylis. "What does it mean?"

Tycho's triumphant grin wilted, became wistful. "'T' is for Tycho, obviously. And 'N'..."

"Ah," Hobbie said. He, too, looked sad.

Fel was curious now. "What does it stand for?"

"Nyiestra. My fiancé," Tycho looked down at the marking he'd carved. It couldn't have been made more than six years ago, but for him it probably felt like a life-time.

"She was on Alderaan, wasn't she?"

Tycho nodded. "I hadn't even remembered this until... I just now. Back then it was, I don't know... Just something I did one time. Crawl under my bunk, mark our names in the bulkhead. It just seemed... Important."

No one seemed to have anything to say. Fel watched Tycho carefully and was surprised by the mix of sorrow and soft happiness on his face. He was remembering his pain, of course, but he was also remembering the love, the good warm memories she'd left behind. Over the past months Fel had been forced to contemplate, repeatedly, how he'd react if he were separated from Syal with the same finality in which Tycho was separated from Nyiestra. When he thought of it now, that very real possibility, it produced only smoldering anger. He wondered how long it had taken for Tycho's loss to burn into the bittersweet thing it was now. He hoped he'd never find out.

Without warning, the entire deck shuddered. There was a brief moment when a deep pressure seemed to clasp Fel by the chest; then it was gone, and everything felt normal, but he knew it was not.

"Hey, did you feel that?" asked Feylis.

"It seems internal gravity has faltered," said Xarcce.

"No," Fel shook his head. "It means the Imperials just dropped their interdiction fields."

Feylis frowned. "Why would Makati do that?"

"Most likely, it means he doesn't need them any more. I suspect that, at this point, he wants to--"

A voice crackled over the speaker in the ceiling. "All crew, go to yellow alert. Repeat, all crew to yellow alert."

“What does that mean?” asked Avan. “Are we attacking Makati now?”

“No,” Tycho shook his head. “It means *Zsinj* is.”

Seventeen hours into the seige of Bandomeer, Grand Admiral Makati decided enough was enough. The star galleons had deployed every last mine in their holds. The torpedo sphere and star destroyers orbiting Bandomeer had more than thoroughly poked and prodded the planet’s defenses but refrained from emptying their entire weapons supply before the real battle began. Most of the crew had been allowed to pass through a sleep-cycle, and even Makati had allowed himself a four-hour nap, after F-4GR prodded him for long enough.

Once he’d got out of bed and woke himself up with a stiff shot of caf, he’d decided they couldn’t wait at longer. When he got to the bridge, he ordered the frigates to prepare for withdrawal. On his command, the three star destroyers bombarding the shields pulled to a position in Bandomeer’s outer orbit, on the opposite side of the planet as *Steadfast*, *Carida*, and *Prefsbelt*. Finally, after putting crews for all ships on red alert, he ordered *Claw* and *Constrainer* to lower their interdiction fields.

The deck shuddered slightly beneath him as *Steadfast*’s artificial gravity adjusted to the shutdown. Both interdictors dropped into lower orbit to protect themselves from what was to come.

Makati stood in the middle aisle of the bridge, watching the forward viewport waiting. He wanted his crew to see him stand tall and confident, though he was as ignorant as the rest of them as to what force *Zsinj* would field.

They had to wait less then two standard minutes. Then they found out.

With minefields blocking *Zsinj*’s two primary vectors of entry, he was left with two broad swathes of space from which to make his appearance. *Steadfast* stood ready to greet them on one side; *Aurora* on the other. There had been no way to know which vector *Zsinj* would pick, and Makati was unsurprised when star destroyers jumped into Bandomeer’s outer orbit from both directions.

Steadfast's tactical crew was on it. They identified the collection of ships that had just appeared before *Steadfast* as three *Imperial*-class star destroyers, designated *Red Gauntlet*, *Blackstar* and *Cavalry*, along with two *Lancer*-class frigates, two *Assassin*-class Corellian corvettes, and, improbable as it seemed, an old Clone Wars *Venator*-class destroyer identifying itself as *Bayonet*.

Aurora's crew was just as prompt. They relayed their report to Makati: two *Victory*-class destroyers, two *Assassin* corvettes, one ancient Rendilli dreadnaught, and the super star destroyer *Iron Fist*.

The name of Zsinj's dreaded flagship sent whispers swirling around the bridge, but it wasn't a surprise. Zsinj had taken almost a full standard day to ready his response to the seige. Makati would have been disappointed with any less forceful a response.

Nonetheless, he would have preferred the response to be a *little* less forceful. His ships over Bandomeer were outgunned at least two-to-one, not counting the Rebels still in their hiding place.

Before the crew could sink further into panic, Makati said, loud enough for all to hear, "Communications, hail *Iron Fist*. Tell Zsinj I want to speak with him personally."

As the comm crew got to work, *Steadfast's* commanding officer, Captain Vivant, sidled next to Makati and said in a low voice, "Those four destroyers are spreading out in take us from all sides. The pickets won't be able to hold them off."

"I'm aware of that. Send an update to Captain Dorja. Tell him to be ready to move on my mark."

"Yes, sir."

Makati marched over to the comm station. His whole body crackled with tension but he had to look calm and controlled before his crew. "Do you have a connection?"

The comm lieutenant- he couldn't have been older than twenty standard years- nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Makati folded his arms in front of his chest. "Put him on."

A second later, a blue holo-image flickered to life in front of him. The fat face and black handlebar mustache was

unmistakably Zsinj, as were the small, intense eyes. The pale uniform and epaulets, though, sent a spike of anger through Makati.

"This is Grand Admiral Zsinj aboard the *Iron Fist*," pronounced the warlord. "To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"You know who I am, just like you know you didn't earn those birds on your shoulders." Makati added quiet venom to his voice; he knew the whole bridge was watching. "I'm offering you a chance to end the charade before it gets violent. If you surrender all forces now and pledge all loyalty to Regent Isard, she will allow you to keep command of *Iron Fist*."

Zsinj chuckled. "In case you haven't noticed, Afsheen, you're extremely outgunned. But I'm a generous man, you know, so I'll throw that offer right back at you. Surrender now and I'll let you join *my* Empire. With two grand admirals on the same side, not even Isard will stand against us."

"You're not a grand admiral. You're a disease chewing away at the limbs of the true Empire. But its heart still beats strong." It was a line he'd planned in advance. His crew would like it; they needed confidence right now.

"Very well. You've forced my hand, more's the pity." Zsinj gave a long, theatric sigh. He was probably playing things up for his own crew. "I'd have so liked to fight alongside you, but instead it looks like I'll have to kill you. But life's full of little disappointments. You learn to get over them. Goodbye."

The holo shrunk to nothing. Vivant was there, on Makati's shoulder, whispering, "Sir, those destroyers are beginning to break formation and launch fighters. They'll be on us in less than ten minutes."

"Then send the signal to Dorja. *Now*."

"Gladly, sir."

Still standing straight and tall and commanding, Makati walked over to the tactical station, where the holo relayed the engagement already beginning on the other side of the planet. *Iron Fist's* massive, nineteen-kilometer bulk was moving toward *Aurora* and its flanking destroyers. The *Bellator*-class

warship, which he'd left in the hands of Admiral Teren Rogriss, was some three times the size of the standard Imperial destroyer, making it by far the largest vessel Makati had brought to Bandomeer, though it was still dwarfed by Zsinj's flagship. There'd been no way to tell whether Zsinj would elect to throw *Iron Fist* against Makati's forces or Rogriss', and he was a little thankful the warlord had chosen the latter; the four smaller destroyers ahead of him were deadly enough.

Iron Fist and its support vessels, tiny by comparison, were vectoring toward *Aurora* with their starboard flanks brushing close to the wall of mines laid down to block Rimward jumps off the Hydian. Likely, Zsinj thought to use it as a defensive wall, protecting one side from attacks by Rogriss's capital ships. *Iron Fist* had a lot of hull to defend, and Makati had been hoping Zsinj would try and use any help available, even an enemy minefield.

He and Rogriss were, in fact, counting on it.

To the tactical lieutenant, he said, "Tell Rogriss to call in the carriers at his own digression."

"Yes, sir."

He glanced at the holo again, this time at the torpedo sphere still sitting in lower orbit. He added, "And have that sphere to start climbing out. Have it move to help Rogriss."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant repeated.

Makati didn't have the kind of targetting data to do with his torpedo sphere what Pitta had done at Tralus, but it didn't matter. *Iron Fist* was too big a target to miss, and repeated heavy volleys of torps along its bow would drain energy from its other shields.

"Admiral," Vivant called eagerly, "Dorja is here!"

Makati could see that from the tactical holo: three friendly star destroyers dropped out of hyperspace, right behind Zsinj's *Red Gauntlet* and *Blackstar*. Captain Dorja's *Relentless*, *Stormhawk*, and *Bellicose* had kept their fighter crews at ready, and they began pumping out TIE fighters and bombers that immediately began bombarding the enemy's aft.

He raised his voice and said, "Helm, engines full forward. Take us to engage *Calvary*. Tell *Carida* and *Prefsbelt* to engage that old destroyer. Tactical, call Colonel Phennir and

tell him to hold the pickets. Leave the lancers and corvettes to the new fighters.”

The crew complied eagerly. He’d kept all but his senior officers in the dark about Aren Dorja and his three star destroyers; their surprise arrival had buoyed the mens’ spirits just when they needed it. The battle on this side of the planet suddenly seemed a lot more winnable.

While *Relentless* began to exchange fire with *Red Gauntlet*, *Stormhawk* and *Bellicose* pulled along *Blackstar*’s flanks. They began to exchange broadsides, and Zsinj’s destroyer found itself squeezed between two heavy barrages of turbolaser fire mixed with concussion missile volleys.

Even as *Steadfast* moved to engage *Calvary*, *Blackstar*’s shields began to buckle. *Bellicose* launched a volley that broke through its defenses and ignited the magazines for its starboard missile batteries. The explosion tore open the hull, spilling twisted wreckage and crewmen into space. *Stormhawk* let loose a volley from the other side that shattered the bridge shields and vaporized the command deck in an instant.

That brought a round of cheers from *Steadfast*’s bridge crew, but one that quickly fell silent. It was a victory, their first of the engagement, but it wasn’t Rebels they’d just killed, it was thousands of Imperials, men who’d been to the same academy as *Steadfast*’s officers, maybe even served on the same ships.

Makati felt sorry for those killed, but only for a moment. Those men fought for Zsinj. Zsinj was worse than the Rebels, and that made the people who fought for him worse too. In choosing to side with that pompous traitor instead of the true Empire, they’d sealed their fate.

Steadfast began to shudder under attacks from *Calvary* but Makati stayed where he was, resolute in the center of the bridge for all to see.

“Not a bad pincer movement,” Burke admitted as he stood on *Emancipator*’s bridge, watching the tactical holo.

“Zsinj was overconfident, jumping in like that without protecting his aft,” General Horton Salm said as he stood next to Wedge on the opposite side of the holo.

“He has reason to be.” Burke stabbed a finger at *Iron Fist*. “He still has a decisive advantage.”

“Still, it won’t be as easy as he thought.”

Wedge stirred impatiently. It was like watching rival Imperials slaughter each other at Tralus, but totally different. This time they were just a few hundred thousand clicks away, and at some point Burke was going to order Wedge and Salm to jump in their snubfighters and charge.

By some odd luck, Makati’s flagship was fighting over the side of Bandomeer that had turned itself to face Envos. If he wrapped up with Zsinj’s ships there and moved to help the rest of his fleet with *Iron Fist*, Burke would surely take that opportunity to make a micro-jump to the planet and attack from behind.

But right now, at least, Burke seemed content to watch the Imperials battle it out. Makati’s big *Bellator*-class destroyer, marked as *Aurora*, seemed to be dropping back into low orbit to meet the torpedo sphere. Likely it planned to use the seige weapon’s heavy batteries to help defend against *Iron Fist*, but without the trick they’d given Pitta at Tralus, defense was all that sphere would be able to do.

Just as the torpedo sphere began to fire its warheads at *Iron Fist*’s approaching bow, four more markers appeared on the holo. They were small red boxes, and it took a second for the computer to identify them.

“*Ton Falk*-class escort carriers,” Burke pronounced. “Ah. Very smart.”

“He dropped them in behind the minefield,” Wedge said.

“Exactly. Those mines are spaced far enough apart for friendly snubfighters to get through.”

Sure enough, they watched as the new arrivals began unloaded their TIEs. Escort carriers were little more than mobile hangar bays, each one containing a full wing of fighters and bombers. Normally they needed support ships to defend them, but right now the minefield served as a perfect barrier against Zsinj’s ships. As they watched, the warlord attempted to send a few squads of Incom Howlrunner fighters to head off the advance. They must have triggered IFF sensors on the forward row of mines, because their markers abruptly winked off the map.

"Very smart," Burke repeated, admiring. "His bombers are taking Zsinj's right flank while the torpedo sphere hits his bow. He can pound *Iron Fist* in two places without even risking his destroyers."

"That ship can take a lot of pounding," Salm reminded him.

"I hope it does. I want both of those fleets very exhausted before we start hurling ourselves at them."

As he looked at the holo, Wedge didn't doubt Burke would get his wish.

As *Calvary* attempted to fall back, Grand Admiral Makati stayed by the tactical display, watching the battle play out on the far side of the planet. He wished he could have seen it with his own eyes: some two hundred tiny fighters streaking through minefield to attack *Iron Fist* and its support ships, dodging the big vessels' clumsy turbolaser fire, scoring hits all along the flagship's stretched-out hull. As Zsinj scrambled to get his fighter screen flying, TIE bombers soared low over *Iron Fist's* superstructure, dropping bombs on its shields with impunity. Once Zsinj launched his fighters they'd be a lot more vulnerable, which was why the escort carriers hadn't disgorged all their cargo right away.

He'd left command of those ships to Rogriss, and he wasn't disappointed with the admiral's timing. Just as Zsinj's Howlrunners began to engage with the TIE fighters and bombers, each escort carrier launched a single squadron of Xg-1 Starwing fighter/bombers. The experimental craft had never had a large production run, and Makati hadn't planned on using them initially. However, one of the surprising adjustments to his battle plan Isard had suggested was to include them for swift, precise anti-capital ship attacks.

The Starwings streaked out toward *Iron Fist*, nimbly avoiding turbolaser fire and taking Zsinj's defending Howlrunners by surprise. They fell in behind the waves of TIE bombers, using the older bigger ships both for cover and to soften the enemy defenses. The squads worked in sync, firing their volleys with impacts times a quarter-second apart. The TIEs weakened *Iron Fist's* shields while the Starwings slipped their missiles through. He was stuck watching it on the tactical holo, but in his mind's eye, Makati could see

dozens of geysers of flame bursting like miniature supernovas across *Iron Fist's* superstructure.

As the Starwings wheeled around to attack Zsinj's old dreadnaught, Makati turned his attention back to the local fight. *Calvary* had fallen back after taking heavy damage. *Red Gauntlet*, too, was trying to disengage, though Colonel Phennir's 181st was harassing it. Surprisingly, Zsinj's old *Bayonet* was putting up a good fight; it had dealt enough damage to force *Carida* to retreat, then used the opening to make a run for *Calvary*.

It was very likely those ships would try to flee. They couldn't do Zsinj much help then and there, and the warlord wasn't the type to command fanatic loyalty anyway. Makati made a quick mental judgment, then said, "Tactical, command *Relentless* and *Bellicose* to intercept *Calvary*. Tell Phennir to pull back also."

The lieutenant frowned. "Should we let *Red Gauntlet* go?"

"That's right. We won't catch any more if we spread ourselves too thin."

"Understood, sir."

Makati stepped away from the holo as the lieutenant gave the orders. He walked down the center aisle of the bridge so all the crew could see him, though most of the men and women in the pit seemed to be attentive to their consoles, performing their duty with the steady confidence of those who expected victory.

There was still the Rebels, of course. They were out there, lurking, waiting to strike. He expected they'd find their opening soon enough. It was good he had prepared for them.

Steadfast turned her bow to point forward, giving Makati an excellent view through the transparisteel as *Relentless* and *Bellicose* converged on *Calvary*. Zsinj's destroyer, already badly damaged, took volley after volley. *Bayonet* arrived to help and began firing broadsides into *Relentless*, but the picket *Presfbelt* had caught up and was nibbling on the old destroyer's aft.

Vivant appeared on his shoulder and said, "Captain, *Red Gauntlet* just escaped to hyperspace."

"Very good. Any sign of motion from Envos?"

"None. Are you certain they're there, sir?"

"Yes, and I think they might be getting ready to show themselves. Once we clean up here, I want all our ships to form up and get close to the minefield. And call our new friends. Tell them to be ready."

Vivant frowned. "Are you certain they'll show?"

"If they want to get paid, they will."

The captain nodded, uncertain, and went to fulfill his orders. Makati walked to the fore of the bridge and watched with his naked eyes as *Bayonet's* hull wrenched open in a fiery explosion. They brought more cheers from the crew, again quickly muted.

"Admiral," the comm lieutenant reported, "We're being hailed by *Calvary*. They're offering surrender."

"Tell them we accept. What about the support vessels?"

The tactical officer chimed in. "Those lancers just jumped out of the system. So did the remaining corvettes."

None of those small ships had taken much damage; most likely they'd swing around with a series of micro-jumps, then reappear on the other side of Bandomeer to give *Iron Fist* some badly needed anti-starfighter support.

Well, Zsinj was welcome to them. Makati had no illusions about destroying *Iron Fist* today, not with the forces he had available. He could weaken and humiliate the warlord; killing him was unnecessary for now.

Besides, he'd have the Rebels to deal with soon enough.

The Rogues had already moved to *Emancipator's* main hangar when order came down to launch. Their X-wings were prepped and combat-ready, and nine pilots scrambled up the ladders and dropped into their cockpits. For Tycho, it was kind of a relief to be back in his X-wing again. The star destroyer's familiar rooms and hallways had been making him feel weird ever since coming aboard, and he'd felt weirder still after the discovery of that little little act of vandalism, carved with a dull vibro-blade into a bulkhead some six years ago by a green cadet who couldn't think about anything more important than the girl he'd left back home.

He'd gotten to the point where he didn't think about Nyiestra or his family for days at a time. Being a combat

pilot helped with that: when you were in a dogfight you couldn't allow yourself to think about anything except killing and dying. The other Rogues had helped too, and maybe Winter most of all.

Right now, though, the familiar embrace of his worn seat-cushions did enough. He ran his hands over the cockpit controls, as much doing pre-flight checks as assuring himself that everything was as it should be.

Before tugging his helmet on, he half-stood out of his cockpit and looked around the deck. The Y-wing pilots in Salm's Aggressor Wing were already getting prepped, though Salm himself seemed to be missing, just like Wedge. He glanced down the row of X-wings of which his was in the middle. Now that they were back to nine pilots they were flying three flights of three: Wedge with Xarce and Avan, Tycho with Janson and Feylis, and Hobbie minding Nrin and Fel. Avan and Xarce were also standing upright in their cockpits, clearly wondering when Rogue Leader was going to show up.

It didn't take long. The entry doors on the far side of the hangar opened and he came sprinting out; the decidedly less slim Horton Salm was right behind him, keeping respectable pace. Wedge clambered up into his X-wing and threw a thumbs-up to Xarce and Avan, who dropped into their seats with visible relief.

Tycho looked in the other direction as he stuck his helmet on. From the adjacent X-wing, Janson asked, "You ready to dance, Captain?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." He called past Janson, "Feylis, are you good?"

She threw a thumbs-up. Tycho couldn't see what the other pilots down the line were, but if he trusted anyone to be combat-ready, it was Fel.

A voice crackled over his helmet comlink, saying, "All pilots, this is Flight Control. Seal your cockpits and start reactors. Do not, repeat, do *not* engage engines until we give the order. Stand by for micro-jump to Bandomeer."

"Aw, stang," he heard Avan breath over the squad channel. "I *hate* micro-jumps."

"I love 'em," said Janson. "It's like you blink, and *bam*, you get a big surprise right in front of you."

"Yeah, except that surprise is usually a bunch of Impstars and explosions," said Hobbie.

"Cut the chatter everyone," Wedge said coolly. "Stand by to jump."

Tycho dropped into his seat, buckled his crash webbing, and lowered the transparisteel windscreen until he was vacuum-sealed in his ship. He felt the cockpit faintly hum around him as his X-wing came to life. Just like he'd done countless other times, he checked his targeting computer, his weapon systems, his engines, his astromech droid. Everything was ready to go.

"This is Flight Control," said a voice in his ear. "Micro-jump in three, two one. *Jump*."

In his X-wing, Tycho could see nothing except the short flash of hyperspace through the hangar mouth. That lasted a fraction of a second; then Flight Control said, "Rogue Squadron, away."

Nine X-wings kicked up on their repulsors in unison, fired their thrust engines, and flying wingtip to wingtip soared out of the hangar. In perfect coordination, nine sets of S-foils split apart and thirty-six quad-linked laser cannons thrust like spear-tips toward the battle ahead: the bursts of explosions, the scream of TIE fighters, the blue glow of star destroyer engines, and the pale proud wedge of Grand Admiral Makati's flagship, dead ahead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CORSIN

Syal Antilles Fel knew absolutely nothing about the planet Corsin until she stepped off her passenger transport and into its spaceport. Spaceports had a lot of things in common the galaxy over: the same mix of shops, the same kinds of restaurants, the same narrow alleys where illicit activity usually took place. Corsin itself, or at least the part of the planet they'd landed on, had cool brisk weather and a blue sky tinged with white clouds. In other words, it could have been anywhere in the galaxy.

Once Syal got further away from the landing complex and started looking for a cheap place to stay (hopefully with a nonhuman proprietor and staff) she saw things were different. There were no black-uniformed ISB agents checking everywhere. There were stormtroopers patrols in the streets, but more often she saw local law enforcement roaming around. The Imperial insignia was still stamped on walls and cargo crates and other innocuous surfaces, but the stamps always looked worn, like nobody'd bothered to apply new ones in a year, which was probably exactly the case.

What she really noticed, though, were the Raptors. She'd heard Zsinj had trained special forces who operated independently of normal stormtrooper squads. She'd had no idea what they looked like, but the first time she saw a trio of men in red armor and faceless helmets with vaguely Mandalorian-looking T-visors marching through a crowd that hurried to clear the way, she had a pretty good idea of what they looked like.

She saw only a few Raptor squads during her first day in Corsin's spaceport, which was fine by her. After walking until her feet felt ready to bleed, Syal found the part of town that was run-down without being decrepit and crime-ridden. After that, she found a Sarkan-owned boarding house that was charged low rates for long-term stays in its small rooms. After checking in, after making the the lock on the door worked Syal allowed herself to lay down on the bed, stare at the ceiling, and close her eyes. It was the first time in days she'd had any real privacy.

Her hands gently touched her swelling stomach. She wondered how Soontir would react if he saw her like this. *If*, not *when*. She tried to muster some confidence, but it didn't come.

When she squeezed her eyes shut, she saw the safehouse on Coruscant, littered with bodies. She felt the sting on her palms as the hold-out blaster went off in her hand. She smelled the laser-burnt flesh of the man she'd killed. Her hand started shaking and she grabbed fistfuls of bedsheets to make them stop.

She opened her eyes and stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling. She wondered how many more of these ceiling she'd see before the end: before Soontir found her or she found him, before Isard's or Zsinj's agents or whoever else was after her captured their prize.

Before she had her child.

She wondered which would come first.

Syal rolled onto her side and tried to sleep.

It was nighttime when they set down on Corsin's spaceport. After a long debate, they'd decide to name their new MandalMotors patrol ship the *Hand of Judgment*. It was what they'd called themselves, after all, when they'd been off fighting a five-man war against corruption in the Empire. Back then, they hadn't named their old Suwantek freighter anything, but this time Quiller had been insistent that his ship have a name. He hadn't been able to think of one, though, and neither had anyone else until Marcross, possibly in an act of sarcasm, suggested their old team name.

They'd decided *Hand of Judgment* was good enough. It was something, anyway. LaRone thought it might grow on him.

Hand of Judgment had a very nice, very Mandalorian built-in security system, and the Corsin spacedocks seemed pretty secure anyway, so the five of them set out before dawn to search for Wynssa Starflare. They left their stormtrooper armor and ISB uniforms back in the ship and instead did their best to fit in with the spaceport crowd, donning loose slacks and vests befitting civilian freighter crewmen.

Brightwater was the one handling the tracker. Despite having hijacked an ISB ship when deserting *Reprisal* four years back, none of them were familiar with the technology Isard had provided them. Every two standard hours, the ISB ID badge stolen by their target released an isotope with a 48-hour decay period. The tracker Isard had provided them was designed to track that very specific isotopic resonance within a radius of five kilometers.

In other words, if they lagged behind Starflare by more than two standard days, they'd lose the trail. It didn't help that Corsin had multiple port zones, but this one got the most traffic, so it only seemed logical to start in this one. Of course, being the busiest, it also had the most ground to cover.

Nobody had dared ask what happened if somebody *besides* Starflare had taken the ID badge. The grand admiral would be pretty disappointed if they'd tracked some random Coruscant pickpocket halfway to the Rim.

"We should have done an aerial recce," Quiller grumbled as they moved through the crowd. This place didn't have the same towering skyscrapers of Imperial City, but it did have the same melange aliens and humans.

"You read the rules," Marcross reminded him. "This place runs a tight operation. No ships allowed outside the landing corridor at a lower elevation than five clicks."

"We could've taken a quick buzz-by. We probably only would've gotten a slap on the wrist."

"We're trying *not* to draw attention, remember?" Brightwater muttered as he glanced down at his scanner. The thing was as big as the palm of his hand but he still tried to keep it in his pocket most of the time, only glancing at it every few

minutes, just in case somebody was on the lookout for offworlders with weird tech.

“Anything?” LaRone asked.

Brightwater shook his head. “This place is a big sprawling maze. She could be anywhere. *If* she’s even in this city at all. If she’s not, we could waste two whole days on this thing.”

“Isard really should’ve given us another tracker,” said Grave.

“She probably doesn’t like giving out her top-secret toys. I wouldn’t be surprised if this thing is wired to blow up after a certain number of days.” Brightwater craned his head back and stared at the stars. “Quiller’s right, we really need to take to the air.”

“I just said that’s impossible, remember?” said Marcross.

“Not entirely.” Quiller tapped him on the shoulder and pointed down the dark alley, to the point where it opened on a larger street. Landspeeders were whipping by, as well as the occasional swoop bike.

“Oh, that’s excellent.” Brightwater grinned. “There’s got to be a place to rent a swoop around here.”

“We could sure cover ground a hell of a lot faster,” said Grave.

“Okay,” LaRone nodded. “Let’s find a rental.”

The shops weren’t open until morning, of course. After a short debate, the five of them retreated back to *Hand of Judgment* for a short rest. Come dawn, all five of them crawled back out of their ship and marched purposefully to the nearest speeder rental.

LaRone was expecting Brightwater to pick something close to the Aratech speeder bike he’d flown during his old career as a scout trooper, or possibly a more heavily armed and armored vehicle that could fit multiple passengers and was slightly more in line with the *Broadsword*-class tanks he was used to commanding nowadays.

“Moquet Nebulon-S racer,” Brightwater said as he stood in front of the swoop bike, grinning. The thing was basically a repulsor engine with steering vanes sticking out front and two saddles strapped onto the back. It didn’t have any weapons either; the rental shop owner said armed vehicles were banned on Corsin.

"*That* thing?" Grave frowned. "You're not getting me on one."

"Who's asking you? All I need is somebody to ride back and work the tracker while I take us on a tour."

"I'm game, if you show me how to work your tracker," said Quiller.

"No problem. Given the size of this town, and the kind of ride we'll have, I bet this will take two hours, three tops."

"What happens to us?" Marcross looked at Brightwater, then LaRone.

LaRone knew he should have said something leaderlike and authoritative. Instead he just shrugged.

"You guys should find a pub and put some of our, ah, employer's credits to work."

"It's barely past dawn," Grave reminded him.

"Somehow, I don't think that will be a problem here," Marcross said. He looked at LaRone. "We can try to pick up gossip too."

"You mean start asking people if they've seen Wynssa Starflare in town?"

"No, but other things. We don't know much how Zsinj operates on this planet, and that would be good to know. Among other things, like how someone might try to slip into Rebel-held territory from here."

Exactly what Starflare would be looking for, in other words. LaRone nodded agreement, and five minutes later the group had split up. As Brightwater and Quiller flew off on their pretty new flying deathtrap, Marcross predicted they'd only need five minutes to find someplace that was serving alcoholic drinks at this early hour of the morning.

He was wrong. It took them a full ten, and for some reason that entire place was filled with two dozen squat little squibs, jabbering away in a language none of them understood. Judging from the besieged look on the bartender's face, LaRone's guess was that they'd all just decamped from the same ship and found the nearest place to eat, drink, and be merry.

It took them a little longer to find another open establishment, but once they did, they formed a line along the half-full bar-counter. As they ordered their breakfast (but no

drinks), Marcross leaned in to LaRone and said, "Admit it. You're enjoying this. I can tell."

LaRone frowned. "Enjoying what?"

"The five of us, on a mission again." Marcross wasn't one for big grins, but his tight smile said it all.

"It's a lot better than groundpounding planets full of soul-sucking lizards," LaRone admitted, "But I'd rather we get this done with as soon as possible."

"Fair enough."

LaRone glanced to his side. Grave had started chatting up some Duros spacer. He couldn't hear most of it, but it sounded like the guy had just landed an hour ago and had an internal clock even more out-of-sync with local time than theirs.

"Well," LaRone told Marcross, "Want to mingle?"

"We can try. Who do you want to mingle with first?"

They looked around the room; it was less than half-full at this hour and most of the occupants seemed to be like the Duros: grungy spacers who'd just come off a long haul. Not that they were any different.

"Hey, turn it up," somebody called from the other end of the bar. The Xexto bartender reached out with one of his six spindly arms and turned the volume up on the holo-projector located in the corner of the room.

LaRone and Marcross, along with a handful of other patrons, moved to the far end of the counter to see what was going. It was a news broadcast, apparently some local channel. The broadcaster, a pretty human female, was reading off her prompter while behind her red lights flashed on a stellar map.

"We repeat, all traffic Rimward up the Hydian Way is frozen at this time. All ships on all ports have been placed on lockdown for their own safety. Planetary Traffic Control has announced that all traffic on that vector will be frozen until the situation at Bandomeer resolves itself."

"What's happening there?" asked a Shistavenan patron.

"Big battle," said a white-bearded human.

"Who's fighting who?" asked LaRone.

"News is a little iffy on that." The man stroked his beard.

"I just heard Zsinj is there. He has *Ion Fist* and a whole fleet," said a man at the back of the crowd.

"I ship out in five hours to Celanon," the Shistavenan was growling. "I *have* to go."

"Traffic control says you're not going anywhere, friend," the bearded man said.

"I must go! I won't get paid if I'm late!"

"Hey, don't blame me. Blame the Rebels. Or Zsinj or Isard or whoever."

"Can't even keep track anymore," somebody rumbled.

As the Shistavenen kept raging and baring his impressive fangs, Marcross tugged LaRone out of the crowd. Grave appeared right alongside them and said, "What happens now?"

"Nothing," LaRone shook his head. "This doesn't change anything for us. It might even help us. She can't run the Hydian so long as they're freezing all traffic Rimward."

"They're *trying* to," Marcross said. "Some guys will just go Coreward, then turn around and skirt Bandomeer on their way to Celanon or Serenno."

"Still, it might buy us some time. We can be pretty sure she hadn't jumped onto another ship yet."

"So like I asked, what happens now?" said Grave. "Do we hang around here or go someplace else?"

Marcross glanced back at the holo and the crowd around it. "I've got a feeling everybody's gonna be talking about one thing for a while. And one thing only."

LaRone felt a vibration in his chest pocket and fished out his comlink.

"LaRone, are you there?" Quiller was saying, voice tense.

"I'm here. We're all here. What's up?"

"Guys," Quiller gasped, "I think we've found her."

Syal didn't sleep much her first night on Corsin. When the sun came up, she gathered her most essential belongings- her fake identicard, the IDs she'd taken from the NRI and ISB agents, both hold-out blasters- stuffed them her layers of jackets and cloaks, then left her suitcase and sundries behind in the room while she went out to explore the city again. Her feet, at least, felt a little bit better.

She knew what she needed to do. She needed to find out where ships were going from Corsin and how easy, or hard,

it would be to slip into some planet held by the Republic. There were plenty of eating and drinking establishments that opened early, or maybe never closed from the night before. For a woman, and a pregnant one at that, it was a lot safer to hit up those places at morning.

A pregnant woman hitting up some cantina wouldn't work either, but she was able to find a 27-hour diner run by a Neimoidian that seemed to be doing good business with locals and spacers alike. She managed to squeeze the swell of her stomach beneath the front counter facing the kitchen; when she caught her reflection in the mirror across from her she was barely recognized the woman looking back: baggy-eyed and tired, dark hair cropped awkwardly short, dressed in ugly black robes. Add in the belly hidden from view and no being in the galaxy would recognize her as Wynssa Starflare. She imagined even Soontir would have to look at her twice.

There was a holo-projector playing in the room, and Syal gradually realized that half the beings in the diner seemed to be watching it. The newscaster woman was explaining that all traffic Rimward was currently being halted by planetary authorities because of a large clash taking place at Bando-meer. Likewise, all inbound flights coming Coreward down the Hydian were subject to possible delay.

Syal felt tightness in her chest. The woman rattled on and on about the flight restrictions, but she wouldn't say anything about the battle itself. There was no reason to believe Soontir was in that fight, but there was no reason to believe he wasn't either.

The news about the canceled flights was making a lot of beings angry. The Ithorian sitting next to her at the counter started complaining with both mouths to the Neimoidian behind the counter; Syal couldn't make out what he was saying and tried to tune out his stereo-speaking by focusing on the beings in the booth behind her.

"A delay like that's ridiculous," said one man, a red-haired human so broad he seemed to spill over his entire side of the booth. "It's not even Corsin that's under attack."

"That battle sounds pretty nasty, though," frowned the blue-skinned, skinny humanoid opposite him.

"I don't care. Space is big. We'll go around it."

"How?"

"What do you mean, *how*? We'll swing around Taris to Botajef, then up go straight up the Hydian, all the way to the end."

"That'll still add time to our trip."

"Less than waiting for this battle to be over. It's not like we're stopping anywhere. We're hauling all the way to the Corporate Sector. And the *Trivigaunte* is a pretty fast ship. If we push it, we can still get there on schedule."

"Well, it's your ship."

"And I say we'll do it."

"When?"

A tiny pause. "As soon as I'm done eating."

The blue-skinned being chuckled. "Okay, then. Guess I'd better get back to the hangar to run diagnostics before we make a run for it."

"They won't stop us," the fat human waved a hand. "And I'm sure we won't be the only ones. Damn this war, Olith. It's mucking up everyone's business."

"I know. They should be more considerate when they chose where to have a battle." The blue-skinned being stood up. "Take your time. I'll need at least an hour to do all my checks."

"Just make sure you do them right."

As he started to walk off, the fat man called him again. "Olith, the berth. What was it again?"

"CBL-14."

"Right, of course. I remembered."

The Corporate Sector was about as far away from anything as you could get. It was technically still aligned with Isard's government, best Syal knew, but the Corporate Sector Authority mostly handled its own business independent of Coruscant. All things considered, it wouldn't be a bad place to hide from Isard.

She cursed herself for the thought. It might have been a good place to hide from Isard, but it was a terrible place to try and connect with her husband. She turned her attention back to the news holo now, where the newscaster had finally started talking about the battle at Bandomeer. Syal strained

to hear over the stereo droning of the Ithorian next to her. The woman seemed to be saying that a Rebel fleet was clashing with that of 'Grand Admiral' Zsinj, but she also seemed to be talking about *another* Imperial fleet. It might have belonged to Isard or one of the warlords; Syal didn't know or particularly care.

If the New Republic really was slugging it out at Bando-meer, there was a good chance Soontir was there. Of course, there was also a good chance he *wasn't*. She wouldn't know for sure unless she found someone in this port who'd willingly fly her into a warzone.

It was a horrible, awful idea, but it was still the best way to find her husband she could think of. She lowered her head and laughed dry, bitter, silent laughter.

Still, there wasn't much she could do here. She got off the stool carefully, and placed her credit chips on the counter. The Ithorian had finally stopped droning and the Neimodian had gone off to the far side of the room, where three humans dressed like freighter pilots were joining two of their friends at a booth.

She tossed another credit chip on the counter, then walked out the front door and into the daylight. She gathered the collar of her cloak around her neck. She wondered if Corsin was always cool, or if this part of the planet was merely going through winter.

It didn't matter either way. She started walking back toward the landing bay area. She wasn't ready to hop on a ship to the Corporate Sector yet, but there might be other vessels with other captains who wanted to skirt the ban out Rimward traffic.

As Syal turned a corner, something caught the side of her vision. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Through the crowd, she could see a cluster of human faces, five of them. They were the same men she'd seen in the diner just two minutes ago. The same men who'd been sitting down to eat.

The thing about being paranoid all the time, at least for Syal, was that someone really *was* out to get her.

She couldn't be sure, but her heart started racing. She walked faster and tried to spot reflective surfaces anywhere

on the street. She'd acted in enough espionage holo-thrillers to know some practical rules for tailing someone and for shaking a tail yourself. They were spreading out, trying to make it not look obvious that they were a team. One of them pulled a hood over his head to hide a comlink headset hooked on this ear. Another, a dark-skinned one, kept glancing at something in his hand.

They were after her. She was sure of it. Who they were was another issue. They could have been NRI, tasked to take her to Soontir. They could have been Isard's agents, or Zsinj's, or part of some criminal group. They were dressed like civvies but something about the way they moved said *stormtrooper*, and that meant nothing good.

She made a hard turn down a narrow sidestreet. There weren't any obvious mirrors she could use and she risked a glance over her shoulder. Two followed her in. The other two might have been heading around the block to cut her off. She walked faster, dodged around the bulk of a slow-walking Yuzzem, then ducked into an alley. There were no people in this alley but a lot of garbage clogged the way; she awkwardly tried to step and skirt around it and hoped her pursuers hadn't seen her slip away.

She heard footsteps behind her: no such luck. Looking back could be fatal. Her heart pounded and her legs ached as she started running for the alley mouth. One of the men shouted for her to stop but she didn't; deep down she knew they wanted her alive, but she was still terrified a stun bolt might slam into her back.

No shot came. She lurched into the open street and ducked into the nearest open door. It took her eyes a split-second to adjust to the indoor gloom of what was, apparently, an equipment shop. Tools and cables and metal parts for uses unknown hung from every conceivable space on the walls and ceiling. A long corridor, choked with mechanical parts, snaked back out of sight.

"Can I help you, Miss?" asked the Snivvian behind the counter.

She stepped out of the doorway's light, but they could still be moment away. She could only think of one thing. She reached into her robes and grabbed a hold-out blaster.

“Hey, what’s this?” the Snivvian’s eyes went wide.

She held the blaster in two shaking hands and tried to keep her voice from trembling. “You never saw me. I am not here. Do you understand?”

“Listen, lady, whatever your problem is-”

“Say it! Say you never saw me!”

“I ain’t seen nothing, I promise. Just don’t shoot.”

She heard footsteps on the stoop outside and scampered down the hallway. She ducked out of the sight and pressed her back to the wall. She tried to slow her breathing and listen over the pounding of blood in her ears.

She heard the Snivvian say, “Welcome, welcome. Can I help you gents with anything?”

“Did a woman just come through this shop?” another voice said.

“A woman?”

“You know, a human female.”

“A female? I’m sorry, I always have a hard time telling males and females apart for your kind.

Another man sighed and said, “She’s got short dark hair on her head.”

“You mean like yours?”

“Like- Yeah, sure, kind of like mine. Except her stomach’s really big. She’s got a pup in there, you understand?”

“Listen,” said the first man, “Did *anyone* just come through this shop?”

“I ain’t seen nothing.”

There was a slight pause, she heard the creak of foots on floorboards sneaking down the hallway as the first man kept talking. “Listen, friend, you’d better think hard on that. Are you *sure* you didn’t see anyone?”

“I just told you. Ain’t seen nothing.”

The footsteps were getting closer. Sweat ran down her face and made her palms slick against the butt of the pistol.

“Then tell me this, friend. You got a back entrance to this place?”

“Back entrance? Well, um-”

“Be honest.”

“Uh, down that hall, two turns to the right. Lets out onto the alley, but-”

Syal turned and ran. She heard boots pounding behind her and half-fell against the door. She pushed it open and ran out into the daylight. Her legs ached and her stomach stung and she tried to cup it with one arm while her other held the blaster. The door popped open again behind her and she popped off two shots. The man ducked back inside the door. She shot at the dumpster sitting across the alley from the back entrance. Her shot tore through the cheap metal and spilled garbage that piled up before the door.

Then she ran into the street and kept running, as best as her body could.

“Fierfek, we lost her!” Quiller’s voice crackled in LaRone’s earpiece.

“Where are you?”

“Got stuck in the parts shop on.... Fifty-third street. She slipped out the back, blocked our way. Going out the front.”

“Which way is she headed?”

“Hold on a sec—”

“*Korlo!* Which way is she headed?”

He heard a shuffling sound, then Brightwater’s voice. “Think she’s heading north, toward the spaceport. Moving fast. Just grabbed a bus.”

“Get on your swoop and track her, but do *not* engage until you’re sure you can take her with minimal witnesses. We’ll head for the port on foot.”

“Copy. See you there.”

LaRone turned to Marcross and Grave and fought a sigh. “You heard that?”

“We heard,” said Marcross. “Can’t believe they got outpaced by a kriffing pregnant woman.”

“Quiller’s probably too starstruck to think straight,” said Grave. “How far to the port again?”

“Straight shot? One and a quarter clicks.”

“Probably around two clicks in the streets,” Marcross said. “Let’s run for it.”

“Agreed,” said LaRone. “Fall out!”

Syal had been lucky enough to grab the hoverbus riding back to the port, but she knew they’d still be after her.

Squeezed between the window and a Skrilling on a bench at the back of the bus, she kept on looking behind her for signs of her pursuers. She couldn't spot their faces but she did see a single swoop bike hanging back, shadowing her. There seemed to be two people mounted on it.

Syal took a deep breath. Those two would grab her as soon as she got off the bus. They had at least three friends who were probably also trying to head her off. If she rode this bus all the way its terminus at the port, she could try to blend in with the crowd, but her trackers would surely spot her.

She carefully reached into her robe and took out the pistol again. She leaned to face the window and removed the gun's power pack. For one of her espionage holo-features, the studio had hired a retired stormtrooper as a technical consultant. The man had shown her and her co-star the basics of gunfighting and even let her practice with live fire.

He'd also shown her how to make a blaster pistol overheat and self-destruct. If the gas pack for the weapon was mostly full, as Syal's was now, it could create quite an explosion.

If anybody in the bus was paying attention to her, she couldn't tell. Her fingers shook as she prodded the insides of the gun, tying the tube that fed from the gas pack into the ignition system. With that done, she stuck the gun into one pocket and the gas pack into another. All she had to do was stick the pack into the gun and both would explode.

It would be the distraction she needed to get to berth CBL-14. She had no idea what kind of ship the *Trivigaunte* was, or if it was taking on passengers, but that didn't matter. It was the only sure-fire way she knew to get off Corsin.

The bus lurched to a stop and picked up two passengers, both squat blue Mrlssi. She let out a breath and took another. The swoop was still trailing her and the others would probably find her at the end of the line, but that was a few minutes away. She had a few minutes to breath, in and out, in and out, until she'd forced herself to calm down. Just like her acting instructors had taught her, all those years ago.

She breathed, in and out, and waited.

They might not have been real stormtroopers any more, but they were still soldiers, healthier than ninety-nine percent of

other humans their age. Unfortunately, they were also laden down with equipment and the streets and alley that were supposed to be shortcuts to back to the port were clogged with foot and vehicle traffic.

Thankfully, Quiller was on the comm the whole time, narrating the bus' slow progress to the port's southeast entrance. LaRone, Marcoss, and Grave managed to get to the stop-off point a few minutes early.

"Okay, good run," Marcross puffed, "Now what?"

LaRone pointed at another hoverbus, which had just pulled up under the awning and was disgorging a stream of passengers, most of which were vectoring straight down the long hallway that led into the massive port complex.

"Okay, we split up," he decided. "I'll go down the hall, in case she makes a straight run for it. You two, stay back. When that bus pulls up, take its flanks. Be ready to grab her if she comes out the door."

"She's got a weapon, doesn't she?" asked Grave.

"Right, so you'll have to act fast if she looks like she's gonna run. Whatever you do, don't make a scene. And don't stun her. She's pregnant."

"Yeah, we got that part." Grave bit his lip and scanned the scene with his marksman's eye. "How much longer?"

"Let me check." LaRone tapped his earpiece. "Quiller, how much longer?"

"Just two blocks away. What's the plan?"

"We're going to try to grab her as she gets off the bus. Have Brightwater drop you off so he's got a spare seat. If things get hairy we might have to throw her on the swoop and run for it."

"Throw a pregnant woman on a swoop?"

"Don't worry, we'll take care of your girlfriend."

"She's not my karking-"

LaRone tapped off his earpiece. "Okay, positions. *Now.*"

Syal's heart started racing again as they pulled up at the bus stop. She waited as the Skrilling got up and joined the flow of beings alighting. When she was sure nobody was looking at her, she took out the pistol and the power back. She took a deep, deep breath, and let it out.

"Hey, Miss?" the bus driver called from the front. "This is the end of the line."

The last few other beings were getting off. She dipped her hands out of view, forced a smile, and said, "Of course. Give me a moment."

The driver gave her a sour look. "I've got a schedule, Miss."

"Sorry. I'll be right there," she said. She stuffed the power pack into the gun and dropped both on the floor. Then she stood up and walked down the aisle as quickly as she could.

The driver's eyes went to her belly as she approached. His scowl softened a little and he said, "Sorry to harp on you, Miss, but I really *do* have a schedule."

She didn't say anything, only grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled him with her out through the door, off the step and onto the pavement.

A second later, the bus exploded.

"Fierfek!" Quiller swore over the headset, barely audible over the thunderous explosion.

"What the hell was that?" LaRone asked as he started running against the stream of panicked beings running *away* from the drop-off point.

"The karking bus just blew!"

"Where's Marcross and Grave? Where's the *package*?"

"I don't karking know!"

The transmission cut off. When LaRone got close enough, he could see that the entire rear section of the hoverbus had been wrenched open with a massive explosion. It was one of those old models that stored fuel in the aft. A tiny spark could have set this off, but LaRone knew it wasn't an accident. The question was whether Starflare had set it off herself or whether she'd been blown up inside.

No, *kark* that. The question was what had happened to Marcross and Grave.

There were bodies lying face-down and smoking on the debris-strewn pavement around the bus. One guy, a human in a bus driver's uniform was staggering to his feet and gazing around in shock. LaRone dodged around him and saw

Quiller running through the smoke, batting it away with both hands.

Before LaRone could call his name, Quiller bent on his knees and rolled someone over. It was Grave. There was ash on his face and blood was coming from somewhere; LaRone couldn't tell how much.

"I've got him," Quiller said. "Find Marcross!"

LaRone ran around to the other side of the bus' smoking wreckage. He saw a man trying to claw across the blackened pavement, away from the bus, trailing blood from a torn-up leg. Coughing up a lungful of smoke, LaRone dropped next to Marcross, grabbed him by the shoulders, and flipped him on his back.

The man screamed as his leg shifted. LaRone tried to hold it straight; shrapnel had torn up skin and muscle on his calf bad. He didn't think Marcross had broken any bones but he needed a tourniquet now and bacta as soon as possible. The thought flashed in his mind that none of this wouldn't have happened if they'd been wearing their stormtrooper armor.

"Hold still!" he ordered as Marcross groaned in pain. He tore off the right sleeve of his robe and started wrapping the mess of his friend's leg. "You're gonna be okay. I promise, you'll be okay."

Brightwater's voice buzzed in his ear. "Boss, sitrep!"

"Got Grave, got Marcross."

"What about the package?"

LaRone just swore.

"I'll find her. Just sit tight."

He heard the low roar of a repuslorlift and saw Brightwater's swoop bike come in low over the heads of the approaching medical personnel. He tugged the tourniquet tight on Marcross's leg, then waved a medic forward. He watched Brightwater's swoop dive under the covered arcades leading into the landing bay complex, swore again, then ran after him.

Syal didn't know if she'd killed anyone in that explosion. She probably never would. She'd tried not to, but if she had, it wouldn't have been her first. But she could worry about all that later. Right then, she flowed with the panicked crowd

moving away from the drop-off port, then against the rush of emergency personnel, all the while following the signs toward the CBL berth section.

For all she knew, the *Trivigaunte* might have already taken off. She didn't know how long ago she'd been sitting in that diner, listening to them talk about their flight to the Corporate Sector. It felt like a year and one minute.

The port complex had a series of moving walkways that made transit a bit easier. She moved fast without running here, and took every opportunity to look around for her pursuers, but she couldn't spot them.

When she arrived at the CBL section, he swore under her breath. One look at the map bolted to the wall told her that this was the section for heavy commercial freighters. The ports here were all designed for ships one to two hundred meters long. Buying passage wouldn't be an option, and she didn't want to risk bribing a crewman unless she absolutely had to. Sneaking aboard, though, might be an option.

She was relieved to find CBL-14 still occupied. It was a big, blocky, ugly cargo hauler, maybe a hundred and fifty meters from aft to stern. She crept along the outside of the landing pad, watching the crew load the last boxes of cargo onto the loading ramp. They were big crates, and she crouched as low as she could as she sneaked up behind them.

She froze when she heard a voice, the same as that of the fat human from the diner. It was coming from the other side of the pile of cargo.

"How much longer? We have to go *soon*," the man was insisting.

"We're almost done, sir," an exasperated crewman said. "Just a dozen more boxes."

"Well *hurry*. I heard those traffic patrols are going to shift position soon. We have to get in the air before they do, otherwise they might block us."

Syal reached around the box closest to her. It was a massive crate, big enough to hold a bantha inside. She fumbled for the latch on its side. Unsurprisingly, it was locked.

"We're going as fast as we can, sir. Say, twelve minutes."

"Do it in seven and every man on your crew gets an extra hundred credits on his paycheck."

"Two hundred."

Syal scampered to another large crate and tugged. The hatch jerked partway open; the bottom latch hadn't been secured.

"I said *one* hundred."

"One-hundred fifty for each of us."

A stubborn pause, then, "Done."

"Seven minutes it is, sir."

The ship's owner grunted and stalked away, but Syal barely paid him any notice. She pulled the hatch open with both hands, stuck her foot in the opening, and tried to pull it open a little more. She heard footsteps of the approaching dock crew, suddenly eager to get the job done fast. She angled her body as best she could and squeezed through the gap. The hatch closed shut behind her, locking her in pure darkness.

Syal fumbled ahead, hands forward. She felt heavy metal crates piled all around her. She heard the sound of the latch being pounded shut behind her, sealing her in. Then the crate vibrated as it started to move.

She had no idea if the hold had climate control. A massive hauler like this might only have it for crew quarters, depending on the needs of the cargo. She had no idea if this crate was airtight. She had no idea if she could get out if she had to.

She found a place to lower herself down, back against a wall, and waited as the crate was loaded onto the ship. She curled her legs up against her swollen belly and lowered her forehead to her knees.

At least she'd escaped. She tried to tell herself that was enough for now, and that she could deal with her new set of problems once they made the jump to hyperspace.

She tried to tell herself.

"Are you sure she's there?" LaRone said as he sprinted down the moving walkways. When it abruptly ended he almost spilled across the duracrete pavement, but he recovered and kept running into the CBL docking section.

"Port fourteen, gotta be," Brightwater said in his ear.

LaRone glanced at a map of the section as he ran past. "Cargo hauler?"

"Looks like. You see me?"

"No. Gimme a second."

LaRone followed the signs to port fourteen. When he climbed up onto the pad he saw a massive boxy transport, felt the heat of its engines warming. He looked around, then up, and saw Brightwater's swoop bike hovering on the opposite side of the pad.

"That thing's about to lift off!" he said, waving his hands in the air.

"No, you think?"

"We have to make them stop." He started running toward the hauler's command forward section, toward its bridge.

"They're not gonna listen to you. You're not flight control and you're not a stormie anymore either."

"We have to try!"

Brightwater's swoop dipped down, out of view behind the transport's massive hull. "Wait a sec, LaRone. I think I see something. Cargo hatch."

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"I'm going for it. I'm going for it..."

"Brightwater, *wait!*"

He heard the groaning of metal in motion, then the roar of the engines as they started up. He ran around to the front of the transport and waved his arms, trying to get the attention of the bridge high above him. If they saw him, they didn't care. The repulsors kicked in. A blast of hot air nearly threw LaRone on his back. The massive hauler retracted its landing gear as it started to rise.

"Wait! Wait! Stop!" he shouted vainly, desperately, so loudly it hurt his throat. He couldn't even hear himself over the roar of the engines.

Then the transport lifted off. Its broad shadow fell over him. As he watched it rise into the sky he heard a voice crackle on his headset, saying, "Safe aboard... I'm on... Try to... contact... Find..."

Then Brightwater cut out. LaRone stood there, on the empty landing pad, and watched as the giant cargo ship dwindled to nothing and disappeared into a clear blue sky.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BANDOMEER

The Rebel fleet had to peek beyond the curve of Envos' surface before making the micro-jump to Bandomeer, and that meant the crew of Makati's fleet had been given a very brief preview of their opponents just seconds before being forced into the fray.

For Makati, those few seconds meant almost everything. The sensor officers gave a clear reading: one *Imperial*-class star destroyer, four Mon Calamari heavy cruisers, two Rendilli assault frigates, two bulk cruisers, and four Corellian gunships.

In short, it was a task force that was more than enough to match Makati's, especially while Rogriss' fleet was still deep in Bandomeer's gravity well, fighting back *Iron Fist* as best it could. Makati wished he could have spared his crew this surprise; just as their spirit had visibly surged with the appearance of Dorja's three destroyers, it positively wilted the moment the Rebel fleet reverted to realspace just behind them, guns blazing and starfighters spilling into space.

"Tell *Relentless* and *Bellicose* to move forward to intercept. *Stormhawk* stays with us. Put our noses to the attackers and our backs to that minefield so they don't surprise us from behind." Makati told the tactical crew. "I want TIEs in space and I want them playing defensive. Right now, we need to keep those enemy snubfighters away from our ships."

The Rebels would be gunning for him, for *Steadfast*, he was sure of it. If they got desperate, they might even try to ram his bridge, as they'd done to *Executor* at Endor.

"Admiral," one ensign said, "*Carida's* in trouble."

Makati followed her finger to a mark on the tactical holo, which was now flashing yellow. The picket, already battered during the fight with Zsinj's force, had been overtaken by a pair of Mon Cal cruisers. The bigger ships had caught it on either flank and were pummeling it with turbolaser volleys.

There was no hope for *Carida*. Makati said, "Have *Prefsbelt* fall along with *Relentless* and take a defensive posture."

"But *Carida*—"

Makati shook his head sternly. The ensign, downcast, followed her orders. The grand admiral spun away from the tactical station and called, "Comm, patch me a link to Rogriss. Personal link."

"Yes, sir."

Makati plucked his comlink from his vest and held it to his mouth. "Admiral, do you read?"

"I heard you, sir," Rogriss said. His voice crackled with static; Makati looked out the forward viewport to see *Relentless*, *Prefsbelt*, and *Bellicose* begin to exchange forward fire with a trio of Mon Cal ships; the other heavy cruiser and their star destroyer hung back.

"Sitrep, Admiral," he said simply.

"We're holding our own against Zsinj best we can, sir. We destroyed his dreadnaught and did some damage to *Iron Fist*, but not enough. He's pushed us low into the gravity well but he hasn't launched an offensive yet. I think he'd trying to pin us against the planetary shield."

"How is the torpedo sphere holding out?"

"She's running out of ammunition, sir. But she broke through *Iron Fist's* forward shields. Zsinj has turned to show us his broadside now."

"Then we've given him a bloody nose. You've seen my predicament, Admiral. Can you hold on your end?"

"For now, sir, yes." There was a tiny pause. "Can you?"

"Hold, Admiral," Makati ordered, and shut off the link. Far ahead of *Steadfast's* bow, space was lighting up with explosions and the strobing light-show of turbolaser fire.

"Admiral," Vivant called from the tactical station, "The first line of Rebel ships has pierced our fighter screen."

Those would be the Rebels' best pilots, and they'd be coming for him. Very likely Baron Fel and Rogue Squadron were among them.

He said, "Call Colonel Phennir. Tell him the One-Eighty-First must stop those ships no matter what."

"Look alive Rogues," Wedge Antilles called over their headsets, "We have incoming."

"I see them," Hobbie added. "Looks like... Three squads of squints."

Soontir Fel's chest tightened. If Makati was here, he'd very likely brought his best, and that very likely meant the 181st Imperial Fighter Wing. According to Republic intelligence reports, the 181st hadn't seen any major front-line engagements since he, Fel, had defected.

He knew deep in his gut, even before he made visual contact, that that had changed.

Another voice crackled over his headset. "This is Aggressor One. Rogues, we're going to begin our first attack run on *Steadfast*. Keep our backs clear."

"Understood, General," said Wedge. "You heard him, people. Let's take care of those squints."

Wedge sounded cavalier, but that wouldn't be an easy task. Fel didn't say it and he didn't have to. They all knew it.

He and Nrin flew side-by-side behind Hobbie's X-wing, and they followed the red glow of his thrust engines as he jumped ahead toward the diamond profile of Makati's star destroyer. Fel would have thought the grand admiral would be manning the larger *Bellator*-class destroyer on the far side of the planet, but apparently Makati preferred to place his flag on smaller ships.

There was no time to think about that. He saw them, a chain of tiny silhouettes against *Steadfast*'s pale hull. He switched power to forward shields and armed his torpedoes. Since switching from TIE Interceptors to X-wings he'd come to appreciate many things about the latter craft, those two most of all.

"All Rogues, claim your targets and get a lock," Wedge called as their nine X-wing hurtled toward a head-on collision with many more interceptors.

Fel clicked an affirmative and dropped his reticules on an approaching squint on the far end of the formation. He had no way of knowing who the pilot was. It could have been a man he'd trained, a man who'd looked up to him. It could have been a stranger Phennir brought on after Brentaal. There was no way he could ever know.

He'd fought in plenty of battle since defecting, shot down dozens of pilots who'd once called him an ally or even a hero. He'd dealt with it those times by doing what he always did in the cockpit: banishing all excess thought, all doubt, all hesitation, and giving himself totally over to honed instinct.

This time, it felt different.

"Mark!" Wedge called.

Fel tapped his trigger, almost a full second later than everyone else's. One torp lanced out, trailing just behind either others. The TIEs broke formation and scrambled in an attempt to dodge the warheads racing toward them. At the same time they sprayed bright green plasma from their forward cannons. They were still at a range where laser energy dissipated with distance; sparks of green energy danced across his shields harmlessly as he broke into evasive maneuvers. As a trio of interceptors broke port in front of him, he caught the flash of red bloodstripes on their dagger-shaped solar panels.

He wasn't surprised, but it still stung.

"Eight, Nine, delta formation!" Hobbie called from ahead. "On me!"

"Affirmative," Nrin said, and Fel echoed him a second later. He and Nrin held tight to Hobbie's aft and all three dived after the interceptors that had just passed. Fel and Nrin spread out far enough that their quad-linked laserfire lanced ahead without getting too close to Hobbie as he dipped and rolled his fighter, spewing his own laser-blasts all the while, desperately attempting to land a shot on the nimble red-striped interceptors.

Fel adjusted his aim and kicked his fighter ahead slightly. He fired ahead of one interceptor and caught it as it attempted a hard turn; his shot snapped off the TIE's port solar panel and sent the cockpit and remaining panel tumbling through space until both smashed against *Steadfast's*

shields and exploded. A few seconds later, Hobbie nailed another TIE in the center of its ball cockpit. The third attempted to flee, but Nrin popped off a torpedo that tracked it through its evasive spirals before catching it in a bright fireball.

"Good job sharing the wealth," Hobbie called as he spun his fighter around. Nrin and Fel followed. As they swung away from *Steadfast*, Fel could see the line of Y-wings from Salm's Aggressor Wing as they began their first attack run. TIE Interceptors were diving on them, strafing at them with bursts of laserfire, and as he watched, one Y-wing took a shot through the cockpit section and turned into a tumbling fireball.

"All Rogues," Wedge called, "Break formations. Take targets of opportunity."

"Affirmative," Hobbie said. "Eight, Nine, go keep those Y-wings safe! Go!"

Hobbie broke right; Nrin took a sharp turn down. Fel hesitated for a second, the cursed himself and pulled upward. He caught a pair of interceptors as they came streaking down; a burst of laser-shots destroyed one outright and clipped the other on the solar panel. Fel spun his X-wing into a matching dive and settled behind the crippled vessel. He tried to get a lock on it but the interceptor bobbed and weaved, even as ribbons of flame trailed from its port engine.

Rone Tearling, he thought. Tearling, from Rhinnal, who could make his fighter dance like nothing else, who could always shake a fighter on his tail, even shake a torp. At least, he could when he had two engines working. Tearling, who used to collect antique currency from all the planets the 181st got stationed at. Tearling, who had terrible luck with women.

Fel's thumb tapped the trigger. His laser-blasts found Tearling and turned him into a beautiful blossom of fire.

Fel pulled up and away. He was breathing hard. Two more red-striped interceptors raced by and began an attack run on some Y-wings. He swore in frustration, then kicked power to his engines and gave chase.

Turr Phennir dove downward and tried to keep his mind on the target ahead of him: the Y-wings currently making attack

runs on the grand admiral's star destroyer. They must have been two-seater Y-wings, because the turret guns above their cockpits had swiveled backwards to spit blue ion-blasts at Phennir and his wingman.

"Stay close to me, Gold Two," he told Drareb Farra. Like so many in the 181st, he'd been added after Fel had disappeared. He hadn't been there for Brentaal, for Endor, Derra IV, any of it. He was a child.

"Understood, Lead," the young man said, and nudged his fighter a little closer.

Phennir bounced his interceptor up and down to avoid the ion blasts, then told Farra, "Take the far left wishbone."

"Understood."

"Ready. Aim. Mark."

Both starfighters unleashed a chain of green laserfire on the same Y-wing. The blasts sliced in from slightly different vectors but hit the same spot in bomber's shielding. Lasers cut through it defensive screen and burst through the hull. The Y-wing, sparking and sputtering, went tumbling out of control and impacted on *Steadfast's* shields.

The other fighters let fly their missiles at the same time. The warheads cut through the destroyer's shields just as they shuddered under the Y-wing's impact; two exploded on the surface but two more slipped through and opened breaches in the hull.

"Stay on them!" Phennir barked, and as the Y-wings pulled up for another round, their ion blasts flashed in his face.

"I'm hit!" Farra called. "Trying to stabilize..."

Phennir ignored him and pumped more lasers into the port engine of the nearest Y-wing. The nacelle burst into flames. As the bomber began to careen out of control he fired off another round that caught the rest of it in an explosion. As the last bomber tried to run for it he kicked his fighter into a sideways dodge to get a better angle of fire, just like Fel had taught him years ago. He lanced out one more set of laser blasts that caught the Y-wing cockpit from its flank, cutting through weak shields and neatly decapitating the fighter.

"Farra, report!" he called.

"Got winged, sir. Trying to sta-"

There was the start of a scream and a burst of static. Phennir glanced at his sensors just in time to see an X-wing barreling down on him, all cannons blazing. He did another sideways kick, then snapped into a steep climb. The X-wing buzzed past him, almost close enough to slap him with its shields. He pulled into a tight turn, glanced at his scanners, and saw the X-wing- a Rogue, nobody else was that good- spinning back around to meet him.

It had to be Phennir. Phennir, or maybe Varlm or Brennet, one of the squad leaders he'd trained personally. Fel wheeled his X-wing around and saw that same red-striped TIE interceptor plunging at him again. He shunted power to his forward shields this time and readied a torp. The squint lit up his energy screen with green plasma but his heads-up display guided his hand. He tapped the trigger again and fired off another torpedo.

The interceptor raced past him just as the torpedo shot out of its launch tube. Fel cursed himself for the critical delay; instead of catching the TIE in the face, the warhead arced into a tight turn as it attempted to catch the fleeing squint. The little torpedo was fast, far faster than any big snubfighter that had to carry a conscious pilot inside, and it would catch up within seconds.

But that squint, it knew how to dance. As Fel wheeled around and readied his lasers for another round, he watched the TIE Interceptor bounce and weave, matching the torp for every turn until the warhead's thrust trail began to shudder as its fuel ran dry.

Then the interceptor hit the brakes. The torp shot ahead. Before it could switch course for a second time, the interceptor caught it with a single laser blast, then soared triumphantly through the resulting fireball.

It had to be Phennir, he thought. Phennir, who'd taken out four transports at Derra IV. Phennir, who'd told him to usurp Isard on Brentaal. Phennir, who'd always looked at him like a hero who could do anything.

He saw Phennir's fighter shudder as it pulled away from the explosion. The heat from the blast, or maybe the shrapnel,

must have done some damage. He veered to give chase, thumb on the trigger.

Was it Fel? Phennir couldn't be sure. He tried to shake the X-wing but the pilot was always on his tail. If he hasn't busted his inertial dampener flying through that fireball maybe he could have shaken him, but as it was, that Rogue was going to nail him any second now.

"This is Lead," he called on an open channel, "Requesting aft clearance now!"

"I see you, Lead," said a voice, female. There weren't many of those in the 181st. "Coming in now."

"Clear off that pointer!" he growled.

"Understood. Stand by to break on my mark."

That was Assyra Cyrillian. Another one of the new kids. Smart, good-looking, very lethal in the cockpit. And female. What was the Empire coming to?

A red laser blast clipped his port solar panel. Phennir swore and wrenched his fighter into a steep climb, but the X-wing followed. An alarm light flared on his control panel; port engine, danger of overheating. Lovely. *But was it Fel?*

He hadn't believed it at first, what they said. It had seemed impossible and he'd refused to think of Baron Fel as a defector, a traitor, a terrorist. Isard refused to confirm it. Even Makati refused to say, one way or the other, but if he knew Fel *wasn't* flying for the Rogues, he would have said. That was how people described the grand admiral, stern but fair. A good man to fight under. So few of those left.

"Cyrillian!" he called. "Any time, please!"

Fel couldn't breathe. He could only shoot. He could land one more good shot on Phennir's TIE Interceptor and blow him to atoms, rob the 181st of another commanding officer, maybe even turn the tide of a battle that would end with another grand admiral dead: eleven down, one to go.

He blinked. He fired. The squint dodged his blast. Fel swore again; he could have made that shot. He *should* have made that shot.

He was hesitating. He was hesitating to kill another man who'd known him and trusted him and admired him and

who'd made the fatal mistake of serving the wrong side in this war.

Just like he had for so long.

The interceptor pulled into a sharp turn starboard. Fel tugged his joystick to the side to match him. As his targeting reticule dropped onto Phennir one more time he rested his thumb on the trigger.

He took a breath, finally.

Then his cockpit shuddered and smoked around him. His astromech droid wailed in dying agony as laser-blasts ripped through his shields and blew out his upper port engine. As his fighter tumbled out-of-control he saw the black-and-red flash of the TIE interceptor that had killed him.

Everything flashed around him as he spun: star, explosions, laser-blasts, the white bulk of *Steadfast*. His hand found the ejection lever and pulled. For a fraction of a second, nothing happened, and he was sure he was going to die. Then his cockpit roof blew off into space, and he was launched out after it, toward all those spinning stars and into a storm of laser-blasts and explosions and flashing death.

"*Excellent* shot!" Phennir felt almost giddy with relief as Cyrillian's TIE Interceptor pulled alongside his.

"My pleasure, sir," she replied. "Lead, it looks like the pilot ejected."

He could hear the eagerness in her voice; she wanted to finish the job, to rob the Rebels of one of their aces. In any other circumstance he'd have urged her on, even joined her in vaporizing that helpless pilot where he floated.

But it could have been Fel. For a second there, when he'd been expecting to die, he'd been certain it was.

"Negative," he told her. "Plenty more pressing targets."

"Understood, Lead." She sounded disappointed, but she stayed on his flank as they dove down toward *Steadfast*, and another flight of Y-wings waiting to be killed.

Makati watched, boots planted on the deck, as a half-dozen missiles launched on glowing thrust-trails from the line of approaching Y-wings. As the Y-wing peeled away, a handful of interceptors swooped down, destroying one in a hail of

laserfire, while the missiles continued to streak toward the bridge.

When they impacted on the shields, the whole command deck shook and the viewport turned white with scattered energy. But then the shaking stopped, the white faded away, and Makati was still standing firm in the center of the bridge.

When he turned back to the tactical station, he tried to pretend his pulse wasn't racing and fear-stoked adrenaline wasn't coursing through his body. "Sitrep, Lieutenant, now."

The officer looked away from the tactical holo and said, "The One-Eighty-First is holding the Y-wings off, barely. *Relentless* and *Bellicose* are barely holding the Mon Cals, sir. They've already taken out *Prefsbelt*."

Both pickets gone, then. Makati restrained a scowl. "Have we dealt them any damage?"

"One of the Mon Cals took a heavy beating and fell back. Two more took its place. Sir, Dorja says he doesn't know how much longer he can last."

"Very well." Makati took a deep breath and turned to find Vivant. He hoped the captain and crew couldn't see how tense he was. He had one card left to play, and if that card *didn't* play, well, he probably wouldn't get to play another.

"Captain," he called, "Are they standing by?"

He didn't need to specify which *they*. Vivant nodded and said, "They await your order."

"Very well." Makati glanced at the forward viewport again. No more Y-wings were making bombing dives but space ahead was still thick with violence and light as the Mon Calamari cruisers tried to break through Dorja's battered forward line.

"Do it," he told Vivant. "Now."

"Yes, sir."

Tycho craned his neck to the side to see the black-scarred nose of Janson's X-wing settle on his starboard flank.

"You holding in there, Five?" he called.

"Best I can," Janson grunted. "I forgot how good these One-Eighty-First boys are. Where's Feylis?"

"One your six," the woman replied. Tycho checked his scanners and there she was, coming on their afts. Behind

them all, running in the opposite direction, was the rescue shuttle they'd escorted through the battle zone so it could pick up Fel after he'd gone EV.

"What now, Four?" asked Feylis as she settled on his port side.

"Give me a second." Tycho switched his comm channel and called, "Lead, you there?"

"I'm here. How's Fel?"

"Safer than we are right now. Is Salm forming up for another run?"

"The Aggressors are prepping another attack. Stand by. They'll need cover."

"Understood." Tycho grimaced. The last attack run had cost a lot of Y-wings and failed to break open *Steadfast's* bridge. He didn't know if another attack was going to be any better, but right now those other Impstars were running fierce interference and preventing any of Burke's heavy capital ships from engaging the grand admiral directly.

He switched his comm channel back and said, "Get ready for another run. We'll be—"

"Whoa!" Janson squawked. "Board's lighting up!"

Tycho glanced at his scanner and, sure enough, yellow markers for unidentified craft were popping up all over. For a second he was just confused; then frightened. Especially when those markers stayed yellow.

He switched his comm again and called, "Wedge, what *are* those things?"

Before he got a reply, static burst over his headset. He swore and spun his fighter around, trying to get a good look before the noise blasting his ears drove him crazy. He saw engine-trails blazing behind some kind of fast-moving small capital ships. More lights, smaller and even faster, seemed to be streaking through the minefield that rose like a wall behind *Steadfast*.

An icy hand squeezed his gut. Then the static suddenly died and a half-familiar voice said, "Attention all Rebel vessels! You'd better get your *aruetyc shebs* out of our way if you know what's good for you!"

Tycho swore and switched his comlink back to the flight channel. "Wes, Feylis, did you hear?"

"We heard," Janson growled.

"But it can't be them!" Feylis protested. "They fought *with* us at Mindor! They-"

"That was just a fight of them." Tycho grimaced. "This is another. They're the enemy this time."

Up ahead, the thrust-trails were growing brighter as they rushed to meet Fenn Shysa and his Mandalorian Protectors.

Fenn Shysa stood on the command deck of the corvette *Crusader* as it plunged into the fray. The tough little ship rocked under his feet and he gripped the back seats of the two crewmen in front of him as he watched X-wings and A-wings collide with the advance screen of StarViper snub-fighters that had just streaked through the minefield.

When the grand admiral had told him *that* bit of the plan, he'd been half-convinced Makati had wanted Shysa to throw his StarVipers into the minefield and blow them up in one fell swoop, but the Imp was surprisingly true to his word. He'd also promised the Protectors a shot at Warlord Zsinj, who'd been trying to reassert control over the Mandalorian Sector for months now.

Shysa didn't *mind* fighting the Rebels here, not exactly. After their little co-op at Mindor he'd grown to respect them, and even grown fond of a few (especially a certain princess from Alderaan) but Makati said he'd give them something even more important: a shot at *Iron Fist*, currently on the opposite side of Bandomeer.

Makati seemed reasonable as far as Imps went, and Fenn Shysa was an optimistic sort.

On the downside, this op would probably forever ruin his chances with the lovely Leia Organa, but keeping Mandalore safe took priority.

Crusader dropped itself right between Makati's two forward star destroyers and the Mon Cal cruisers they'd been brawling with. The big cruisers tried to adjust their guns, but the Mandalorian corvettes were fast and heavily armored. On Shysa's order, they fell like a pack of akk hounds on the closest Mon Cal ship and let loose volleys of concussion missiles on its exposed flank. Their warheads punched a hole in its starboard side, spilling the ship's entrails into space. Its

other shields shuddered and died and the two Impstars began tearing up its nose with concentrated turbolaser fire.

As that warship began to sink and die, someone called, "*Mand'ador!* It's the grand *shabla* admiral himself, wants to talk to you!"

"Just a sec," Shysa clambered over to the other side of the corvette's cramped flight deck. A holo appeared over the comm officer's helmet, showing the blue head and shoulders of a man with a scowling face over gold epaulets.

"Is that you, Shysa?" Makati asked.

The *Mand'ador* pulled off his helmet, shook his shaggy hair from his face, and grinned. "Reporting as requested, Grand Admiral."

"Excellent. Keep your corvettes in the center of your formation. I want to move onto the next stage, as discussed."

"You want some StarVipers? How many squads? One? Two?"

"Two will suffice. I'll send some TIEs help help protect your corvettes."

"Glad we've got a fair exchange going. You want us to help clear a path for you?"

"Please."

Before the holo could shrink off, Shysa called, "Hey, after the Rebs pull out, will we get out shot at Zsinj?"

"Mandalore, I'd be most happy to oblige." Makati almost smiled.

Shysa grinned and turned off the holo himself. He patted the top of the comm officer's helmet.

"Yes, *Mand'ador?*"

"Give Spar a call, *ner vod*. Tell him we're onto stage two."

It had been Isard's suggestion to hire the Mandalorian Protectors for this battle. Frankly, Makati would have much rather been standing on *Whelm* right now, but apparently savage mercenaries were, on occasion, more reliable than old friends.

Shysa and company were performing exactly as advertised. Their corvettes and assault shuttles had swooped directly into the heart of the Rebels' formation and had already broken one Mon Cal cruiser and forced another into retreating.

Now, together, they were going to blow it all wide open. Two dozen Mandalorian StarVipers peeled off toward *Steadfast*, wings like curved knives spread open like four-clawed hands, slicing through X-wings, A-wings, and Y-wings on their way. After they raced past the destroyer's bridge, they dove into the minefield, where six of Makati's *Gamma*-class assault shuttles were already at work. The assault shuttles were just small enough to be able to fit easily through the minefield; they were also the smallest vessels Makati had equipped with a tractor beam. Each assault shuttle reeled in a dormant proton mine until they were hugging it so close it almost tapped the underside of the hull.

All six shuttles began to move out carefully of the minefield. The StarVipers hung a safe distance from the shuttles; though the mines' detonation sensors were deactivated they were still live warheads, and if a stray blast knocked a mine it would create an explosion so white-hot not even wreckage of the shuttle would be left behind.

Then, as fast as safety would allow, the assault shuttles raced for the Rebel warships. The StarVipers flew a loose defensive screen and didn't seem to catch the enemy's attention at first; the Rebels were still clearly reeling from the Mandalorian surprise.

Snubfighters from *Relentless* and *Bellicose* were doing a good job keeping the Rebel fighters busy. The shuttles and the StarVipers plunged forward toward the nearest Mon Cal cruiser. It was busy fighting off an attack from *Bellicose* and didn't even turn its turbolasers on the newcomers until they were almost within throwing range.

Then there was a bright burst of light, visible even from *Steadfast*'s bridge. Something- a lucky turbolaser blast, a smart Rebel snubfighter- must have landed a shot on one shuttle, detonating the mine it carried beneath. If the Rebels hadn't seen his plan before, they surely saw it now.

It didn't matter, though. The remaining shuttles were already at their target. Two of them pulled close enough to the Mon Cal Cruiser to release their tractor beams and let inertia carry their mines the rest of the way. Makati watched with his own eyes as two explosions burst on the side of the Rebel ship, tearing open its hull and spilling its entrails out

into space like a gutted animal. Its shields collapsed and engines died, leaving *Bellicose* to tear its corpse to pieces.

Two seconds later, another mine exploded beautifully and killed another Rebel ship.

“What the *kark* was that?” Janson’s voice squawked in Wedge’s ear. “Are they throwing *mines*?”

“I didn’t even know you could *do* that.” Avan sounded amazed.

“Rogues, shut it!” Wedge snapped. “We need to kill those shuttles *now*!”

“Copy that,” Tycho said. “Two Flight, form on me. Let’s go.”

Wedge glanced at his scanners and saw Avan and Xarccce dropping behind him. He kicked his engines to full power and leaped toward the smoldering wreckage of the Mon Cal cruiser *Serenity*. It was already dead, and a third mine had just torn a major hole in *Crucible*. Its engines were straining and two of Makati’s star destroyers were moving in to finish it off. Painful as it was, Wedge knew he couldn’t do anything for its crew; he needed to find the other shuttles, and he had a good bet as to where they were headed.

Admiral Burke’s *Emancipator* had hung back from most of the battle, but now some of the Mandalorian Crusader corvettes were starting to harass it. They were nasty pieces of work, as tough and heavily armored as the soldiers inside, and as Wedge raced for *Emancipator* he saw one of their own Corellian gunships burst into flame.

“Check your scanners, people,” Wedge called. “We need to find those shuttles.”

“They appear to have StarViper escorts,” Xarccce added helpfully.

“I see one, heading for *Emancipator*,” Hobbie reported. “NrIn, on me. Let’s take it.”

As two X-wings broke formation, Tycho reported, “Incoming StarVipers, five o’clock. We’ll handle them, Wedge. You get that last shuttle.”

“Copy.” Wedge glanced at his scanner. Hobbie and NrIn were trying to drop on the tail of one target, but a pair of Mandalorian fighters were attempting to run interference.

Knowing he had to leave it to them, he searched his sensors for the last assault shuttle, and found it cutting a straight line for *Emancipator* while two StarVipers hung close behind to guard its rear.

"Target acquired," he announced. "Two, Three, on me."

Together, they streaked toward the last shuttle. The craft made no attempt to evade, but the two Mandalorian ships guarding flipped nimbly about and moved to engage.

"All ships," Wedge called, "Mark torps on the portside fighter. Do it now."

"Mark!" cried Avan.

"Mark," said Xarce as the two StarVipers, barreling toward them head-on, began unleashing chains of laser blasts. As his shields lit up, Wedge held his ship steady and set his targetting reticule right on its octagonal cockpit.

"Fire," he said, and thumbed his trigger.

The Mandalorian fighters were heavily armored and heavily shielded, but they couldn't withstand three torpedoes impacting simultaneously. The torps streaked toward it head-on, and at this range it had no room to evade. Wedge didn't know whose torp impacted on its shields, but the next two ripped right through and smashed through the transparisteel cockpit before exploding brilliantly.

The other StarViper didn't give up. It pivoted with its wingtip microthrusters and dropped behind Xarce and Avan, splattered laser blasts across their aft shields.

"Two, Three, break formation!" Wedge ordered.

"Already on it, Lead," said Avan as his X-wing peeling right, while Xarce took hers left. The StarViper, to its credit, didn't hesitate. It kept flying straight after Wedge.

"Hold on, Lead," Xarce said, "We'll get behind you."

An alarm sounded in Wedge's cockpit: incoming torpedo. He shunted power to his aft shields, released a plume of chaff, and dove. For a second it looked like the torp had raced past his chaff and was going to slam into his rear section; then the warhead exploded brightly behind him.

"We've got the fighter pinned down," Avan announced. "Lead, take the shuttle!"

Wedge nodded and pointed his fighter back toward *Emancipator* again. His surge of confidence was suddenly

stopped by the sight of a bright explosion against the destroyer's bow.

"Stang it!" he heard Hobbie curse. "Boss, we couldn't get it in time!"

"Looks like the shields absorbed some of the impact," Nrin reported. "I'm still seeing hull breaches on the bow."

There was still another shuttle out there, hauling another mine. Wedge glanced at his scanners and saw it, vectoring straight for *Emancipator's* bridge. He armed his torps again, set them to double-fire, and rested his hand on the trigger. The shuttle made no attempts to maneuver, even with its cover gone. The pilots probably thought they could drop their load before Wedge got within firing range, and they might have been right.

He dropped his reticule on the bright glow of the shuttle's engines. His computer refused to lock on, saying the target was still out of range.

There wasn't time. Wedge killed his targeting computer and switched to manual.

If it had worked against a Death Star, it should damn well work on one shuttle.

He lined up his shot, took a breath, and tapped the trigger.

Two torpedoes lanced outward. They seemed to dwindle into nothing the parallel lines of their dissolving exhaust trails converged on the bright light of the shuttle. He tried to watch their tiny black silhouettes as they disappeared against the glare of the ship's engines, but lost them.

A second later, space ahead of him exploded with light. He tugged his starfighter away and shielded his eyes; when he dared open them again he saw energy shuddering across *Emancipator's* forward shields. Amazingly, they held.

As he banked away, his elation was squelched. The destroyer's bow had been torn up badly by the first mine; it was blunted and blackened, and there was chance they could erect operating defensive shields around it. He wheeled to face the rest of the Republic fleet and was greeted by the sight of two Mon Cal cruisers being ripped to pieces by four approaching star destroyers.

A voice said on his headset: "All ships, this is Admiral Burke. *Emancipator* has been damaged and we've lost

Crucible and *Serenity*. We're falling back. I repeat, we're retreating. All fighters, return to your barn. We'll try to take on as many ships from *Crucible* and *Serenity* as we can."

Wedge allowed himself a very deep sigh, then switched his comlink to the Rogues' channel. "All fighters, you heard the man. Fall back to *Emancipator*."

"Understood." Hobbie sounded more relieved than anything.

"Copy that," said Tycho. His disappointment was more clear. "Let's get out of here."

Eight X-wings pulled into a line, then raced back to safe haven, leaving smoldering space behind them.

"Look at that, they're running," one of *Crusader*'s helmsmen remarked as the Rebel fighters started swarming for their ships like glowing red flitgnats.

"They know they can't win this one," Fenn Shysa said. "Comm, get me Spar."

"Right away, *Mand'alor*. Into your *buy'c*?"

"Do it."

A second later, Shysa heard a click, and then Spar's breath rasping in his ear. He asked, "How many did you lose?"

"Seven StarVipers," the old clone said grudgingly.

"Well, at least we cracked open a couple cruisers."

"I'm still itching to take on Zsinj, *Mand'alor*."

"You and all your *vode*."

"And word from the grand admiral?"

"Not yet. I-"

The comm officer patted him on the arm and said, "It's *Steadfast*."

"Hang on, Spar. Marching orders are on their way," Shysa said, then cut the channel and removed his helmet. Once he did, he found himself facing Grand Admiral Makati's holo once again.

"You can see the Rebels are falling back," Shysa said. "Should we pursue?"

"Negative. Zsinj is our main target now."

"Can't tell you how glad I am to hear it."

"I thought as much. I recommend you take your fighters around the planet and attack *Iron Fist*'s flank through the minefield."

"You want to try that same trick with the shuttles?"

"I'm already getting them prepped."

"*Kandoshii*. Talk to you again soon, Admiral."

Shysa turned off the link and stuck his helmet back on. When he was fighting, at least, he always felt naked without it.

"Okay, *vode*," the Mandalore announced to his eager crew, "Let's finish this."

The Seige of Bandomeer lasted less than two hours more after the retreat of the Rebel fleet. By the time Makati's ships and the Mandalorians arrived, Rogriss' forces had their backs to the planetary shield and were desperately fighting for their lives. The star destroyer *Vanguard* had taken the brunt of a broadside from *Iron Fist* and been vaporized, and *Aurora* itself had taken major damage to its port. The torpedo sphere had emptied all its reserves, slowing *Iron Fist*'s advance without stopping it.

Then the Mandalorians came, their StarVipers escorting some two dozen of Makati's assault shuttles as they plucked proton charges out of the minefield and hurled them against *Iron Fist*.

To his credit, Zsinj had seen what they did against the Rebel fleet on the far side of the planet and tried to intercept, but the Mandalorian escorts had fierce pilots. Fourteen shuttles were able to land their mines on *Iron Fist*'s superstructure, tearing up large portions of the hull, while a fifteenth mine fatally gored one of Zsinj's smaller *Victory*-class destroyers. Makati's four warships came around from the other side of the planet, catching Zsinj in a pincer, while Rogriss pivoted *Aurora*'s starboard to face *Iron Fist*'s stern and pumped a withering broadside volley through its weakened forward shields.

After less than ninety standard minutes of fighting, Zsinj reversed *Iron Fist*'s engines and withdrew from Bandomeer's orbit. After gathering its support vessels, the battered super star destroyer lurched into hyperspace. Short before his exit, Zsinj commed *Steadfast*'s bridge and delivered a torrent of profanity in at least a dozen languages. Makati had made sure his rant was re-broadcasted through the entire fleet.

After that, Fenn Shysa called. The Mandalorian was much more civil, and much more pleased with the result of the battle. In a more private conversation, Makati politely thanked the mercenary and assured him that the promised credits were already deposited in the agreed bank account. He also reassured Shysa that Director Isard had no intentions on the Mandalorian Sector.

As the Mandalorians began their withdrawal, Bandomeer's planetary defense force finally lowered the defensive shields. The first landing teams were deployed from *Aurora*, though shuttles from the other star destroyers promptly followed. There was no resistance; the first landing team reported that all defense force staff that had been installed by Zsinj had been placed under arrest and awaited proper judgment.

With all of that done, Makati finally retired to his cabin.

"Would you like a cup of caf, sir?" asked F-4GR as Makati dropped into his chair.

His quarters on *Steadfast* were more spartan than those on Imperial Center, but he'd made sure the furniture was eminently comfortable. It was essential for situations just like this one.

"No thank you, Forger." Makati shook his head and started to unbutton his uniform jacket. "Right now all I need is ten hours' sleep."

"Its quite understandable, sir."

Makati rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. He felt that if he stayed like that he'd dissolve into the cushions, and right then it didn't seem a bad fate at all.

"May I ask a question, sir?"

Without opening his eyes, he said, "Go ahead, Forger."

"I was surprised by your decision to enlist the Mandalorian Protectors."

"That's not a question."

"Of course. I'm sorry. It's just that, well, how did you know you could trust them?"

"I didn't. But I decided it was a bet worth taking."

"Well, that plain now, I will admit, sir."

"If it was plain to start it wouldn't have been a bet, would it?" He opened his eyes and looked up at F-4GR's blank

metal face. "I offered the Mandalorians a chance to weaken Zsinj. They took it, and it worked. *Iron Fist* won't be harassing Mandalorian space anytime again."

"That's very true, but Fenn Shysa had shown no love for the Empire either."

"Yes, but right now, Zsinj is the bigger threat to him. We're in no condition to reestablish control over Mandalorian space, even if we wanted to."

"I see. So it would be considered an alliance of... mutual self-interest and temporary convenience."

Makati allowed a tired smile. "Skillfully put. Thankfully, I don't think we'll have cause to call on them again."

"That sounds like excellent news, sir. Have you spoken with Director Isard yet?"

"I've sent her a preliminary report. I'll speak to her in person later. Once I'm rested."

"Of course, sir. I imagine she'll be well pleased."

Makati closed his eyes and smiled again. Isard was not pleased easily, but taking a critical resource planet while fighting off two enemy fleets should please her very much.

Pleasing Isard wasn't why he'd done it, of course. But it made him feel good all the same.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ORD BINIIR

As Ardu8 Kaine's conference aboard *Reaper* continued, Octavian Grant began to realize, gradually and with some reluctance, that Isard had been doing him a favor, even if she hadn't realized it.

As he sat in on the meetings, contributing only if prompted, he began to see that each of the participants wanted something different, while Kaine wanted something specific from each of them in turn. In a way, it was instructive to see Kaine maneuver the other delegates to where he wanted them.

From the Rebels, it was clear he wanted a formalized truce. Their Bothan delegate understood this and wanted the same, but both parties knew that if the Rebels ever took Coruscant and solidified their power in the Core, then Kaine's Outer Rim holdings would become their priority. That eventuality, however, was by no means certain, and Kaine managed to wrangle some assurances from Tresk Im'nel: mainly, that the Rebels would not pursue Imperial officers they'd declared war criminals into the Pentastar Alignment and would respect the sovereign law of the Alignment in its territory. In exchange, Kaine promised not to interfere with Rebel business outside his space, though traffic of their ships was strictly prohibited.

As for Zsinj's delegate, the bloated Teubbo the Hutt was interested in economic benefits. It seemed that many of Warlord Zsinj's shell corporations were failing to turn a profit as desired, and the territory Zsinj claimed lacked the resources and extraction tools to develop the kind of

industrial base a self-sustaining miniature empire required. Kaine, however, had emulated the Corporate Sector by allowing ruthless resource extraction and industrialization on uninhabited worlds. He agreed to trade some of his surplus resources to Zsinj, again in exchange for assurances he'd be left alone.

As for Temius Holt, there was less to negotiate over. Zsinj's swathe of territory lay between Kaine's and Teradoc's, so there was little point in talking about trading goods or respecting borders. Kaine attempted to winnow an intelligence-sharing operation out of Holt, but the man refused to be impressed with the admittedly less than impressive enticements Kaine was offering (or at least what he was offering while Zsinj's representative was in the room). Holt also stated that, in forging a tighter alliance with Kaine, Teradoc would risk breaking his undeclared truce with Ysanne Isard. As he'd said so, he'd cast a sidelong and purposeful glance at Grand Admiral Grant.

Because of their past relationship, because of the professional respect they'd established long ago, Kaine took Grant back to his office to speak in private.

"I assume you want to offer me something like you gave Holt," Grant said as he took his seat.

Kaine nodded. His expression was serious; there'd be no Sartinaynian wine this time. "With one critical difference. Isard must agree not to infringe on my borders. In exchange, I'll give her all the intel I have on the Rebels, and on Zsinj's movements near my territory."

"Isard doesn't *recognize* your borders, or your territory, any more than she recognizes Zsinj's."

"She may not recognize them, officially, but the fact that you're here shows the Pentastar Alignment is a reality she's prepared to deal with. Unlike Zsinj. I think the choice for you is obvious."

"Am I supposed to believe you aren't offering intel about us to Zsinj? To the rebels?"

Kaine's distaste showed on his face. "I'm offering out of respect. I believe in the Empire, Octavian. I believe in one strong, unified government to rule this galaxy and I know,

just as you do, that keeping the Core Imperial is essential to that end."

"Then why your Alignment? Why sit here in the Outer Rim and let Isard fend for herself against the Rebels and Zsinj?"

"I'm *not* doing that. I just offered to help."

"Because you believe in the Empire's ideals. I believe you. I actually do. But Isard won't believe in you, just like you don't believe in her. She sees everyone who doesn't swear allegiance to Imperial Center as a rebel and a traitor. Period."

"She's not that impractical. Your being here proves it."

"My being here proves she wanted to humiliate me while she sent Makati off to fight glorious battles and win fame and approval."

Somehow, amusement and irritation warred on Kaine's face. "Goodness. I'm sorry, I didn't realize everything was all about *you*."

Grant sighed. "I will report your offer to Isard. After that, it's in her hands."

"I suppose that's all I can ask."

Grant nodded and rose from his chair. He hadn't been lying to Kaine; he fully expected Isard to reject his suggestion immediately. As he walked for the door, Kaine, still seated behind him, said, "My offer still stands, Octavian."

Grant stopped at the door and looked back at him.

"I mean it," Kaine said. "A ship like *Reaper* deserves a grand admiral at the helm."

"Perhaps. But I have an attachment to *Oriflamme*, humble as she is."

"If Isard won't let you fight the enemy, why stay with her?"

It was a question Grant had been running though the back of his mind the entire conference. Joining Kaine wouldn't necessarily solve his inactivity; the Alignment was, after all, staunchly isolationist, and *Reaper* more a deterrent than a warship. As for Isard, well, she didn't respect him, but she *should*. After all he'd done in his life he deserved it, and deep down, he recognized part of him wanted to *make* her give him what he was owed. Simply defecting to Kaine's side would be smart; it would also be selfish and cowardly and justify Isard's low opinion of him.

That was part of it, but there was something else, something that kept him lurking around Imperial Palace instead of defecting to Kaine, or making himself into yet another greedy system-grabbing warlord, despoiling the once-great name of the Galactic Empire.

There was something else, but he couldn't quite identify it, so he turned on Kaine without a word and walked out of the office.

When Grant returned to his temporary quarters on *Reaper* after that discussion, his comm system had an encrypted message from *Oriflamme*, still sitting in orbit over Ord Biniir. When decrypted, the message told Grant exactly what he wanted to hear: Grand Admiral Makati had taken control of the planet Bandomeer, in the process fighting off attacks by both the Rebels and Zsinj himself. He scrolled through the report and relished the details about the damage done to *Iron Fist*, and the complete destruction of three of Zsinj's star destroyers.

Grant copied select portions of the report to a datacard, slipped it in his pocket, then marched down the hall to where Temius Holt was quartered. After three loud knocks, the door slid open, and Grant found himself staring the former intelligence agent in the eye.

"May I come in?" Grant asked politely.

Holt arched an eyebrow and looked him over, like he was expecting the grand admiral to have a vibro-blade hidden somewhere. Then he shrugged and ushered Grant in.

The cabin was small and undecorated, a near-replica of Grant's own. The viewport looked out on Ord Biniir's slow rotation. Holt walked over to the transparisteel portal, glanced down at the planet, and asked, "Well, what do you have for me?"

"What makes you think I have anything?" Grant clasped his hands behind his back and did his best to act professional. It was always important to do so, in conversations like these, when your activities were anything but.

Holt crossed his arms over his chest. "You want to make a deal with me about something. You want to do it behind Kaine's back. Im'nel and Teubbo's droid have already been

here to see me. I don't know what Kaine's thinking, putting us all together like this."

The room was almost certainly bugged; Holt surely knew, and was probably trying to get Grant to slip something he shouldn't. That didn't matter, though, not for what Grant had come for. Still, he asked, "What did the Hutt want from you?"

"He's already accepted Kaine's offer. He was offering to resale some of what they get from Kaine."

"For a reasonable price, I assume."

"That was sarcasm, right? It's hard to tell with you."

Grant chose to ignore his surly manner. He glanced casually around the room; Holt was a notorious drinker but there didn't seem to be any cups lying around. "Did you accept, or will you take it back to Teradoc?"

"I told the droid to get out and tell his bloated master we're not interested in deals. We don't need his marked-up resale, that's for sure."

"Is that true? I understand that your, ah, Greater Maldrood Sector is suffering a lot of the same problems as Zsinj's territory. Lack of industrialization, failure to capitalize on natural resources, et cetera. Of course, those are hazards of trying to build a second Empire with some third-rate colony worlds on the Outer Rim."

"Kaine seems to be doing all right. At least, he makes it look that way."

"He does, yes. But that's not why I'm here."

"All right, why *are* you here?"

Grant took the datacard from his pocket and lay it down on the low-set table in front of Holt's sofa. Then, very deliberately, he lowered himself into the chair on the other side of the table.

Holt sighed, sat down on the sofa, and inspected the card. "I give up," he said, "What's on it?"

"Recent update from Bandomeer. I suspect the Hutt just got one like it."

"Bandomeer?" Holt frowned.

"Yes. On the Hydian, major ionite desposits-"

"I know where Bandomeer is." The card vanished in Holt's folded fist. "What happened there?"

“My, ah, fellow grand admiral just took the planet from Zsinj. He had to fight off two fleets to do it- Zsinj’s and the Rebels’- but the planet is now in the hands of the *proper* Empire once more.”

Holt didn’t seem skeptical; it was possible he’d gotten word from his watchers already. He leaned back in the sofa and said, “Well, I always knew Makati could fight. Two against one, though, that sounds impressive, even for a grand admiral.”

“A selection from the report is on that card, specifically regarding casualties on Zsinj’s side. Assuming your own agents haven’t picked that up already, it details the destruction of several of Zsinj’s star destroyers, plus the damage done to *Iron Fist*.”

“*Iron Fist*? Really?”

“Oh, yes. According to Makati’s estimates, it should be undergoing repairs for at least a month. And of course, Zsinj’s territories Coreward along the Hydian are now extra-vulnerable.”

Holt’s face twisted with a restrained smile. “So what do you expect me to do with this? Walk down the hallway to Teubbo’s cabin and gloat?”

“I wouldn’t stop you if you did,” said Grant. He might even want to spectate.

“Well, I appreciate your keeping me informed, but that can’t be all you’re after.”

“No. Of course not. I’d like to make this the beginning of an arrangement between you and I.”

“You mean between Teradoc and Isard?”

Grant gave the tiniest shrug. “I believe more sharing of information could help us both. I’m sure Teradoc will want to take quick action while *Iron Fist* is no longer, shall we say, a player in the game.”

Holt nodded and looked back at the card in his palm. Teradoc would want to go on the offensive against Zsinj now; he couldn’t afford to pass up the opportunity.

“It should be clear to you that Isard sees Zsinj as a priority threat,” Grant said. “We both came to Kaine’s little conference to talk about decreasing hostilities on some fronts so we may focus on others. I think the way forward is clear.”

"Do you have more where this came from?" Holt thumbed the card.

"Not yet. I was hoping for something in exchange first."

"What you gave me isn't that big. My people could have found all of it out on their own. You don't think I have spies in Zsinj's fleet?"

"I don't doubt it, but I took this straight to you once I got it. And you don't doubt Isard's intelligence gathering, do you?"

"No. No, I'll give her that at least."

"Excellent. I came here to open a door. If you plan on shutting it, I'd like to know now."

Holt sighed and slid the card into a pocket. "That would be sort of like cutting off my own hand, wouldn't it?"

"That's a strong metaphor, so I hope it's correct. I've also included information on that card about how to contact me directly. Once decide to signal your interest, I think we can begin an ongoing exchange."

Holt gave a knowing smile. "Not going through the Ubiqtorate, then?"

"Eliminating the middlemen would help us both, I think."

Direct access to intel from Teradoc would also help Grant improve his standing in Isard's eyes; Holt could do the same with his boss too. As far as deals went, this one might have been the only one drawn up on *Reaper* that was truly beneficial to both parties.

"I look forward to working with you, Mister Holt," Grant said.

Holt considered the grand admiral for a moment, then nodded and gestured for Grant to go. The grand admiral tipped his head, then walked out of the cabin and into the corridor.

He didn't know where this would take him, but it was something. It was a start. One thing Grant had learned decades ago was that you had to plant as many seeds as possible; with luck and persistence, a few would inevitably grow, and lift you up as high as they could go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PALUSTRIA

The voyage from the Corporate Sector to the Core had gotten tricky lately, now that most of the Hydian Way was in Warlord Zsinj's possession. To be sure, thousands of civilian ships went up and down the Hydian every day without issue; if anything, Zsinj encouraged the free flow of goods through his new empire to make it look more legitimate. At the same time, traffic along the Hydian was heavily monitored for ships aligned with Zsinj's enemies: rival warlords, Isard, or the so-called New Republic.

That was where the problem came in for Maria Varlow. Her freighter *Palustria* was technically civilian, but was chartered by the Corporate Sector Authority to carry goods to the Imperial military academy at Carida, goods that Zsinj would surely love to steal from Isard, especially after her grand admiral just gave him a humiliating drubbing at Bandomeer. Once it had been an easy run down the Hydian; now Varlow had to plot an elaborate series of jumps around Zsinj's space that almost doubled the transit time. In addition to being time-consuming it was also more dangerous to run cargo nowadays; after a run-in with pirates near Axxila a year ago, she'd installed a series of hidden weapon emplacements along the hull.

The whole situation left Varlow in a suitably terrible mood, which was, perhaps counter-intuitively, why she'd allowed *Palustria* to take on a new crew member right before departing Ession with a hold full of IntelStar Co. hyperdrive cores and navigation computers destined for installation in

Imperial warships. When she'd brought Tavea aboard, her first officer, a weary Trianii named Gorkulh whose fur was going gray, had shaken his shaggy head and asked if they'd be taking on any more stray animals.

Varlow didn't regret it. When her crew had reported a human female sulking curiously around their loading dock, she'd had them bring the woman aboard for a talk. To her surprise, the sulker had been a mere teenage girl, dressed in work-clothes two sizes too big for her, dirt smudging what was actually a pretty face, smooth and white, with piercing violet eyes and black hair that would probably look lovely if it was ever washed.

The girl was clearly on the outs, with no friends or family or job to speak of, but as she told her story in *Palustria's* hold, Maria Varlow couldn't help but see so much of her past in the girl. Like Varlow, this Tavea had grown up on Bonadan, the Corporate Sector's polluted industrialized heart, and like Varlow, she's always been fascinated by spaceships and technology. Like Varlow, she was a quick learner with machines, and like Varlow, the first time she'd gotten off-world was by stowing away on an outbound freighter and, when found, offering to work for her passage.

Varlow was not, generally speaking, a woman known for her soft heart, but she couldn't resist the temptation to offer Tavea a job on *Palustria*. If nothing else, showing the girl the ropes of a CEC Action V freighter would keep her occupied during the annoyingly slow and awkward trip around Zsinj's space. As expected, the girl was a fast learner, and also as expected, she actually was quite pretty once she'd gotten a chance to use *Palustria's* showers. Still, some habits died slowly, and she kept on wearing the bulky old mechanic's jumpsuit she'd come aboard in.

Varlow was still captain, so she didn't spend all her time with Tavea. Various other crew members, with various degrees of enthusiasm, also spent time training the girl. They were three days out from the Corporate Sector when they reached the Shaum Hii system, at which point they'd get a straighter shot Coreward without all the aggravating short hyperspace jumps. Tavea was on the bridge with Varlow when they reverted to realspace on the system's edge.

There wasn't much to see except stars, and the disappointment showed on the girl's face. "Where's the planet? Are we close?"

"We're just dipping into the edge of the system," said the Lafrian pilot Enmar from his seat at *Palustria's* helm control. "There's not much to see anyway."

Tavea's expression wilted. "Isn't Shaum Hii inhabited?"

"It's a backwater, barely industrialized." Varlow said as she stood over Enmar's shoulder. "You're going to see much more interesting places to come."

"I hope so," Tavea mumbled, downcast.

"We're just stopping here to plot our next jump through hyperspace," added Gorkulh. "Very routine."

"This all might seem routine to you all," Tavea pouted girlishly, "But I'm not a spacer. I can count the number of planets I've been on with one hand."

"Don't worry, you'll get there in time," Varlow said. "Speaking of routine stops, Enmar, how long until we can make the new jump?"

"Navcomp's getting a lock now. Should be ready to go in a minute."

"Excellent." She looked back to the girl. "After this, Tavea, I want to take you down to the forward sensor cluster. Gorkulh can give you a run-down on the systems."

The Trianii made a little growl in the back of his throat, indicating how much he'd enjoy *that* task, but Varlow made a point of ignoring him and Tavea, thankfully, didn't seem to notice at all.

"I'll do my best to take it all in." She stuffed both hands in the pockets of her oversized jumpsuit. "My head's still kind of spinning from what Enmar showed me."

"You seemed to take it all in fine, girl," the pilot said. "I could tell you've looked at starship engines up close before."

"Yes, but nothing this *big*."

Varlow said, "Speaking of engines, Enmar..."

"Right, right, I've got it. Course is set. Now we can--"

"Hold up!" Gorkulh called, "Something just dropped out of hyperspace, right behind us!"

Alarm shot through Varlow; there shouldn't have been any traffic in this corner of space.

"Shields up!" she called. "If they don't move off, hail them and ask what they want."

"Captain, shields aren't responding," Gorkulh growled.

"What do you *mean* they're not responding?"

Suddenly the entire ship shook. Varlow was nearly thrown across Enmar's shoulders but she steadied herself on the back of his chair and asked, "Were we hit?"

"They just tore off our port maneuvering fin," said Gorkulh.

"What do they want?" Tavea asked, voice trembling.

"Our cargo, what else?" Varlow said. "Enmar, can you get us to hyperspace?"

"Yes, ma'am," the pilot said. He reached forward, grabbed a throttle, and pulled it back-

-and nothing happened.

"Oh," Enmar said, "Oh, that's not good."

There was another rocking, and Gorkulh reported, "They just blew out our upper starboard shield."

"Enmar, try to maneuver!" Varlow snapped. "Gorkulh, get the guns ready!"

"Already on it, Captain."

A spacecraft dived in from above them, then began to turn for another pass. Varlow recognized the model immediately: *Marauder*-class corvettes were common picket ships for the Corporate Sector Authority fleet, but they were also popular for pirates and smugglers galaxy-wide.

"Hit it before it comes around for another pass!" Varlow ordered as she watched it turn.

"Uh, Captain..." Gorkulh said, voice suddenly shaky.

"What?" Varlow turned angrily around, then froze.

Tavea was standing right next to Gorkulh. She had a small blaster pistol in her hand and it was pointed right at the Trianii's head.

"What is this?" Varlow gaped. "What are you doing?"

"We're being hailed!" Enmar called.

Varlow couldn't take her eyes off Tavea, off the wicked slash of a smile on her pretty child's face.

A harsh, non-human voice suddenly came loud over the bridge. "Stand down immediately or face further punishment. We only want your cargo. Surrender now and you will not be harmed."

"No!" Varlow snapped instinctively. "They're not getting my ship! Enmar, tell them!"

The voice went on, "Your ship has been sabotaged. You cannot run and you cannot fight. Surrender now if you want to live."

"Captain," Gorkuhl growled, "Do what they say."

"You really *should* do what they say," added Tavea.

"But what is this?" Varlow croaked. "Those pirates... You're working for them?"

Tavea laughed: bright, innocent, girlish laughter. "Don't be silly. They're working for *me*."

Once its captain stood down, it didn't take much effort to seize control of *Palustria*. The transport was boarded and its crew corralled in the aft cargo hold. Stock was taken of its cargo while the habitat quarters were ransacked for valuables. The rush for spoils was far more chaotic than the cataloging of hyperdrive cores, and there was only one rule that the motley assemblage of pirates obeyed: everything in the captain's room belonged to Leonia Tavira.

For her part, Tavira was simply glad to step through the docking tube and be back aboard *Courtesan*. The Marauder corvette was her sole souvenir from her stint as part of Kavil's Corsairs, a bunch of mangy Outer Rim raiders. She was glad to be running her own pirate crew now, but *Courtesan* itself was a fine ship, small and nimble and well-armed. Marauder corvettes were a standard of the CSA customs fleet, and *Courtesan* had been fitted with a stolen identification transponder that guaranteed her victims in the Corporate Sector didn't realize her intentions until it was too late. This time, the job had taken her a bit further afield, though it promised to be worth the trip.

Once she was aboard her ship she was greeted by the usual cries and whistles from the crew that wasn't pillaging *Palustria*. It was a mangy assortment of outlaws, some from Kavil's old crew but most of them new additions from Corporate Sector space. Tavira headed straight to her quarters but was intercepted on the way by a man about ten years older than her with pale skin, black hair, and a scar that ran horizontally beneath his right eye.

“Did you have fun over there, Captain?” Van Tyrac asked, tone slightly reproachful.

“Of course I did. It really was a learning experience, you know. I’ve never been an expert with starship innards, but I’m getting better.”

“I’m glad you can add another talent to your list.” He still acted awfully terse for a man who’d just made a big score.

She stopped and looked up at him. With a smirk she asked, “Oh, Van, were you worried about me, going on that ship alone? I’m touched, truly, but you know I like to be hands-on.”

“I do know. You enjoy the challenge. You don’t trust any of *us* to really get the job done. And you think it’s fun to slip into other people’s lives and play with them like a nexu before she eats her prey. Does that cover it?”

Her smirk wilted into a scowl. Sometimes she allowed herself to forget that Tyrac could read her emotions better than anyone she’d ever known. They’d met on Bonadan five months ago, shortly after she’d decided to try relocating to the Corporate Sector. Since she’d been a little peasant girl growing up on Eiattu, Tavira had learned how to hide her intentions and steer other people, especially men, into giving her what she wanted. Van Tyrac was the only one she’d met who saw straight through her, and it had taken another two months before he’d finally admitted how he did it.

Well, Leonia Tavira didn’t have any magic Force powers, but she still knew how to read people, and she knew why Tyrac was with her now. “Your concern is very sweet Van, really. I know you’d be lost without me. My connections. My resources. My bottomless knowledge...”

Tyrac snorted, amused. “You forgot to mention your personal charm.”

“Without my *charm* you’d still be doing cheap cons and petty robberies like you were when I found you. Besides, I was never in any danger. That woman trusted me implicitly.”

“As well she should. You made up your whole backstory to get her sympathy.”

“Yes, remind me to thank Billibango for slicing into her personnel files. Just tell me, did you send the message?”

“Yes. The buyer’s on his way. Said he’d be here soon.”

“Excellent. If I’m not on the bridge before he calls, send it right down to my cabin.”

As they reached her door, he looked her up and down and said, “You know, that old mechanic’s suit just isn’t you.”

“Shut up, Van,” she said, unlocked her door, and stepped on through.

Her cabin, though cramped, was stuffed full of spoils for different raids. The lush bed had come from a yacht they’d seized over Ession, the fine wood-carved wardrobe was from a freighter taken at Kail, and the floor-to-ceiling mirror was from a ship they’d hit up inbound from Reltooine.

She caught her own reflection and she had to agree with Tyrac. The oversized jumpsuit really wasn’t her. It had served its purpose, of course: she’d needed all those bulky pockets and hidden compartments for her blaster and all the little tools she’d used to sabotage the engine and shield systems on *Palustria*, mostly during the night-time shifts when the crest of the crew was blissfully asleep. Tyrac was right that she’d been taking a risk in doing it herself, but the rest of *Courtesan*’s crew were thugs and mangy outlaws who’d never have been able to work their way into Maria Varlow’s trust like Tavira had. And of course, the whole act really *had* been fun.

But as Tyrac said, the jumpsuit wasn’t her. She got out of it as quickly as she could, then dropped herself onto the bed. As she savored the softness of Dramassian silk sheets, she allowed herself to wonder what kind of plunder she’d get from Varlow’s quarters. Probably not much; the woman was painfully pragmatic and unostentatious. Still, it would be fun to rummage through her drawers and see what secrets the old woman surely kept hidden. Tavira had yet to meet anyone in this galaxy who didn’t have something dark inside; some just kept it hidden better than others.

As she pondered that and enjoyed the silk bedsheets against her skin, she heard her comm system chime. She reluctantly unwound herself from her cocoon and went over to the console.

“Tavira here. What is it?”

“The buyer’s arrived,” Tyrac’s voice said. “Want to speak to him?”

"Of course I do. Patch him in."

As she waited for the signal to relay she considered grabbing something from her wardrobe, but it would be nothing Zsinj hadn't seen before.

Then a holo-image sprang up before her, and it wasn't Zsinj. The man wore a dark Imperial uniform, not a white one, and his face was thin and unremarkable instead of plump and mustachioed.

She crossed her tight arms over her chest. "General Melvar, is it?"

Zsinj's right-hand-man nodded. "Moff Tavira. How nice to see...so much of you."

"I haven't been a Moff for over a year, General. I have what you want. Do you have what I want?"

"As soon as we check the hyperdrive cores, credits will be deposited in your account. I'm sending a shuttle over now."

"We'll make sure your boarding party feels... welcome. But remember our deal, General. Everything that's *not* on the cargo manifest goes to my crew."

"Don't worry. We know how your spoils system works."

"I'm glad to hear it. I must say, I'm a little disappointed Zsinj didn't come for his new prize personally. I'm sure these cores will be *very* helpful for repairing his ships after what happened at Bandomeer."

Melvar's face twisted at mere mention of the battle. "The grand admiral is quite busy right now, as you can imagine."

"I certainly can. Let me know when your checks are done, or if your party has any problems."

"Of course."

She reached to turn the holo off, then paused. "One more thing, General. You'll be taking the whole transport back to your territory, correct?"

"If it's as intact as you say it is."

"Don't worry, I didn't cripple the hyperdrive permanently. You'll find it easy to repair. I was just wondering what you'll be doing with the crew."

"The crew?" Melvar shrugged, like they were an afterthought. "They don't hold any value as prisoners, so I imagine we'll space them. Why? Is that a problem?"

"No," she said, "No problem at all."

Five minutes later, Tavira was dressed and on *Courtesan's* command deck. Tyrac was there too, standing by the forward viewport and looking out the Carrack cruiser that had joined them on the edge of the Shaum Hii system.

Tyrac crossed his arms over his chest and said, "They're already aboard, Captain. Rossk and Levran's team are giving them a wide berth."

As well they should; some of her crew got excitable when it came to taking spoils, and if one of her Niktos or Trando-shans got into a stupid fight with one of Melvar's people it could wreck what had been so far a very profitable partnership with Warlord Zsinj.

"So, what happens when we're done here?" asked Tyrac. "Back to Bonadan?"

"I think so. We'll see if we can't buy *Courtesan* a few refits while I do more... information gathering."

Tyrac snorted. "Is that what they're calling it now?"

"It's how we learned about this ship, isn't it?"

"True enough." He thought for a moment, then said, "Your approach to this job was even more hands-on than usual and it got me wondering *why*. Was it the credits? Were you excited about helping another ex-Imperial make good?" He added one of his vicious grins. "Or was it about stealing from Ysanne Isard?"

"You mean you can't just pluck the answer from my mind?" She stared stubbornly ahead at the Carrack.

"You know I can't do that without more effort into it. So which was it?"

"All three, of course."

"But especially the last one."

He didn't need Force powers for that. The so-called regent on Coruscant had cheated her, denigrated her, looked down on her as a child and an amateur. Some people said revenge was the obsession of petty minds; Tavira always believed those people had just never done it right.

Men like Baron Fel left the Empire's service to fight for another cause. Others, like Zsinj, fought for empires of their own. Leonia Tavira had left for the same reason she'd joined. Some other people said that the best revenge was living well, and she'd never doubted them for a moment.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HOME ONE

Baron Fel drifted between sleep and waking; it felt like he was stranded between life and death.

In all his years as a pilot, he'd never been forced to eject into a combat zone. Not once. He could barely remember having done it now: the swirl of color and blackness, the shrapnel tumbling around him like a million knives, the bitter awful cold of space creeping through his vac suit. Memories, like consciousness, seemed as fleeting and elusive as the bubbles of air that drifted in front of his eyes as he bobbed in the bacta tank, healing slowly.

Sometimes familiar faces would resolve from the glass-distorted blur outside the tank's curving walls. Wedge Antilles, his brother-in-law, leaned his head in close enough for their eyes to lock. Tycho Celchu did it once, too. He was close to sure that had really happened, but he also remembered Turr Phennir staring at him from a few meters beyond the glass. He couldn't make out a face then, but he'd known it was Phennir. He'd known the black flight suit, the spiky blond hair, the faint streak of the scar running up from his mouth. It hadn't occurred to him that he'd imagined Phennir until Rone Tearling's face had pressed close to the glass, as vivid as Wedge's or Tycho's. He'd known instantly that it couldn't really have been Tearling, because Tearling was dead, and Fel had killed him.

Sometimes, in moments he assumed were waking, he saw familiar forms moving around the edges of whatever medical

bay he was stuck in. He made out Nrin from the brown crescent of his head, and Avan for his short blond hair.

Once there was a woman with gold hair to her shoulders standing dead ahead of him, too far away to make out her face through the blur of swirling bacta. It could have been Feylis, but he wanted it so very much to be his wife.

Another time she'd stepped right up to the glass and placed her hand on its smooth exterior. He's raised a hand and covered her small palmprint with his own from the other side. She'd leaned in close, and he'd stared into her eyes and remembered all the things Syal Antilles had ever been to him: an echo of simple life on Corellia, a piece of holo-star glamor a farmboy could claim for his own, a person who looked at him without awe or admiration or fear but simple knowledge. A woman from whom he needed everything but wanted for nothing. More than anything, a respite from the whole heavy weight of an Empire.

He'd known it had been a dream, but he'd indulged it, tried to sink into it for as long as he could. It was better than anything he'd find on waking.

He knew that when they finally pulled him out of the bacta tank, he'd have to face it all: That he'd killed Tearling and other men he'd known and trained and trusted. That he'd broken his oath to Wedge and the Republic when he couldn't kill Phennir. That he'd failed as a pilot and a soldier by allowed himself to become so distracted it nearly killed him.

All those conflicted tides wracked his conscience but above it all was the knowledge that his loyalties, his honor, his judgment, all of it mattered less to him than finding his wife.

He'd already broken one oath for her sake. Fel knew deep down, as he floated between waking and dreaming, that he would do it again.

It was only a question as to when.

Wedge had to count himself lucky. The Rogues had only lost one X-wing and no pilots. They'd fared far better than most squadrons at Bandomeer; General Salm had lost a third of his Y-wings and was desperately trying to replace them. Still, it was hard to come out of that fight feeling anything remotely like optimism, especially as his brother-in-law

floated in bacta for two straight days in *Home One*'s sick bay after being transferred from *Emancipator*.

He went to visit Fel in sick bay, as did the other Rogues, but he seemed nonresponsive in his tank. After one visit, walking back with Hobbie and Janson, the latter asked, "Do you think that's the first time Fel's ever gone EV?"

Wedge's first thought was that it couldn't have been. All modesty aside, Wedge himself was a damn good pilot and even he'd been forced to eject before, sometimes in combat zones. Fel was better than him, but not *that* much better.

But Hobbie said, "I don't know. Maybe."

"Why do you say that?" Wedge asked as they made their way down *Home One*'s corridors to the mess hall.

"Well, the Empire doesn't exactly prioritize pilot survival like we do, you know? Sure, TIE fighters have ejection systems, but they're harder to pop out of than X-wings. Plus, with those weak shields, most pilots who get vaped don't even *know* they're vaped until they're already dead."

"Maybe you're right," Wedge admitted. "Did he ever talk about that sort of thing at the Academy?"

"Nope." Hobbie's head wagged back and forth. "He was more about killing the enemy than getting out of fights alive. Of course, all the Imp instructors were."

"Sounds like a happy place," said Janson. "I'm glad I got my education elsewhere."

"Me too," Wedge agreed. "But in all the flying he's done, well, I can't believe he hadn't been hit even *once*."

"You know, it *is* possible to fly without getting shot down," Hobbie reminded him.

"Funny thing for *you* to say." Janson slapped him on the back. "How many wrecks have you racked up?"

"Don't ask," Hobbie waved his mechanical hand.

Before Wedge could think up a rejoinder, they turned a corner and two flashes of white whipped past him. Surprised, he spun on a heel and saw two white-gowned women spin around to see him. Winter was on the right, datapad in hand, white hair down around her shoulders so it seemed to flow seamlessly into her gown. Beside her, hands on hips, brown hair braided into two curls on either side of her head, was Princess Leia Organa.

"Princess!" Wedge said, "I didn't know you were aboard."

"I just got back before you and Rouges shipped out to *Emancipator*." Leia smiled and took his hands in hers. "Winter says you all made it out in one piece. I'm glad."

"More or less one piece," Wedge amended. "Fel's still floating in bacta, but he should be out in a day or so."

"I heard you tangled with the One-Eighty-First out there."

Wedge glanced sideways at Winter. Her face was blank, but he was guessing the princess had gotten a blow-by-blow from her aide, who'd in turn got it from Tycho.

"Yeah, we all did. That's where Fel got shot down."

Her eyes went grave. She instantly understood what the rest of the Rogues already knew, and what they'd never tell Fel when he got out of the bacta tank. When forced to fight his old friends, the great flying ace had finally lost his nerve, and almost his life.

"Great to have you aboard, Princess," Hobbie said from over Wedge's shoulder.

"Thank you, ah, Hobbie."

"Where'd you come from before this?" Wedge asked her. "Didn't I hear something about Milagro?"

"That's right. We captured another star destroyer there. And..." she trailed off.

"Don't worry." Wedge waved a hand. "I know some things are over my pay grade."

"Is the rest of the Provo Council here too?" asked Janson.

"That's right," she said seriously. "As you can imagine, we have a lot to talk about."

"Princess, we still need to go over a few things beforehand," Winter said gently.

"Of course. It's good seeing you safe, Wedge. All of you. We'll talk more later."

"I look forward to it," Wedge waved as Leia and Winter turned as one and continued their walk down the hall.

As the three X-wing pilots started their march in the opposite direction, Hobbie said, "She remembered my name. That's a good start, right?"

"Best you're going to get," Janson snorted. "Isn't she with what's'face now? You know, the guy with the Wookiee?"

"You mean Han Solo?" Wedge grinned.

"I thought that was off again," Hobbie said plaintively. "Or maybe it's on again. I can't keep track any more."

"You've got set your sights higher," said Janson.

"Higher than a princess?"

"Hobbie, in case you haven't noticed, we're X-wing pilots. Military poster-boys of the New Republic. There's a whole galaxy of women just throwing themselves at our feet, each more glamorous than the next. Just look at Tycho, Avan, even Fel.

Hobbie rolled his eyes. "Wedge, how women many have thrown themselves at you in the past week?"

"Do female TIE pilots count? There were probably a few of those at Bandomeer."

"Probably weren't that gorgeous though."

"Hey, Wedge," Hobbie nudged him with an elbow. "Whatever happened to what's'er'face? You know, the one who shot Wes down?"

"Who shot me-" Janson stopped. "Oh, *that* kind of shot down. I remember her. She was the one with, you know, the, ah-" He waved two curves in the air.

"Reina Faleur," Wedge pronounced. He hadn't thought about her in months.

"Whatever happened to her?" asked Hobbie.

"Ciutric happened. We got pulled for the mission and before we got back they shipped her out to Contruum."

"You talk to her since?" Janson asked.

"Only once. I've been a little busy, you know."

"Yeah, but she was still, you know," Janson waved his hands again. "Plus Tycho said she was into you."

It felt weird, knowing people were discussing his love life behind his back. It felt even weirder to realize he'd almost had something like a love life to be talked about. He'd found Reina attractive, and she'd seemed to find him attractive too, but nothing had come of it. Deep down he'd never expected anything to. He'd gotten so used to the war dragging him away from anything he could have wanted for himself that he'd gotten used to it.

"It doesn't matter," he said at last. "It was just one date and we barely had time for dinner before we got called away."

"Oh, that's shame," Janson heaved a sigh. "You could have shown her that Ewok dance. Then she'd be *begging* to have you back."

"Wes, shut up," Wedge said cheerily.

When the New Republic Provisional Council held its first full conference after the battle at Bandomeer, the mood was decidedly sour. As they listened to Admiral Burke give his debriefing, they all betrayed various states of agitation: Borsk Fey'lya's cream-colored fur bristled whenever Burke mentioned the causality count, while Admiral Ackbar's massive Mon Cal eyes went even wider whenever Burke explained one of Grand Admiral Makati's clever tactics. Sian Tevv kept averting his own black eyes when Burke passed his across the table, and Kerrithrarr let out the occasional mournful groan that his droid didn't bother to translate. Mon Mothma kept her expression admirably stoic, though you could see the disappointment on her face.

For her part, Princess Leia Organa did her best to follow her mentor's example.

When Burke finally finished his review, Mon Mothma thanked and dismissed him, leaving the Council alone with itself. Leia braced herself, fully expecting Borsk Fey'lya to begin by scolding all those who had approved the attack.

Instead, though, it was Admiral Ackbar who heaved a sigh and said, "I apologize for what happened at Bandomeer. As Supreme Commander, it was my responsibility to approve only battle plans we can trust to work."

Fey'lya held his tongue, and while Kerrithrarr gave a series of plaintive moans. Leia had picked up Syhriiwook well enough thanks to spending time with Han and Chewie, but the protocol droid did an elegant enough translation, saying, "The Councilor wishes to remind everyone that Admiral Ackbar was not alone in approving this mission; the plurality of the Council voted in its favor. Therefore, he should not attempt to shoulder the blame when, by their nature, this Council and the Republic itself are about sharing burdens."

"Thank you, Councilor," Leia spoke up. "I'd also like to remind everyone that there was no way we could have known what tactics the grand admiral would employ, since

we've never faced him in combat. Just like there's no way we could have known Makati would enlist the help of Fenn Shysa and his Mandalorians."

Fey'lya cleared his throat and added, "If we've learned anything from this, it's that we should not underestimate the enemy just because we've never faced him before. The Emperor didn't choose his grand admirals on a whim."

Councilor B'thogg said, "The issue now is where Makati will be sent after this. Perhaps after Bandomeer, our admirals can come with better ways to counter him."

"We are already studying Bandomeer in depth, I assure you," grated Ackbar.

"Studying Makati is important," began Fey'lya, "But it's more important to think laterally. Makati just handed us a major defeat and we should be looking for new courses of action that *doesn't* immediately throw us head-to-head against him."

"Do you have something in mind?" Sian Tevv asked. Though he'd been absent during the initial meeting about Bandomeer, the Sullustan councilor had later joined Fey'lya in casting his vote against the attack, while Leia and Mon Mothma had joined Ackbar in its favor.

"I do." Fey'lya folded his paws on the tabletop. "Over the past several weeks, I've been sending out diplomatic feelers to the leadership of the Corporate Sector Authority. I believe some critical progress has been made."

Leia frowned and looked at Mon Mothma. The older woman caught Leia's eye and gave her a barely-perceptive nod, indicating that yes, she *had* known about the Bothan's covert diplomacy, and approved it. To Fey'lya, she said, "Please elaborate, Councilor."

The Bothan leaned forward eagerly and looked around the table. "As all of you know, the Corporate Sector Authority controls hundreds of systems and extracts more resources than all our current territory put together. The CSA is nominally aligned with the Empire and only sells to corporations and systems loyal to Isard, but most of the Hydian between it and Coruscant is controlled by Zsinj. After losing Bandomeer, Zsinj is going to be looking at the Corporate Sector with much more urgency."

"After what Makati did to *Iron Fist*," Doman Beruss said, "I don't think Zsinj can launch an invasion at this time."

"Very true, but the CSA leadership knows the pressure is on. My preliminary communications have been via couriers, but they've indicated a desire to speak face-to-face."

Leia had too many questions to start, but Kerrithrarr roared one. His droid said, "The Councilor wishes to know exactly *who* in the CSA government you've been talking to."

Fey'lya spread his paws. "I'll trust this information will not leave the room. My primary contact has been the Prex, Zrey Go'thal. Aligned with him are several Viceprex, namely Riga Lanchenzoor, Lankar Dright, and Malor'dacan."

Sian Tevv raised a small hand. "Would the Councilor, ah, remind us as to these positions in the CSA hierarchy?"

"I can do better. The CSA is run by the Direx, a committee of corporate heads. The head of the Direx, elected by its members, is the Executive Officer. Currently that is Jevith Leon. Together the current Imperial Advisor, Tise Maloc, and approximately half the voting members of the Direx, they make up the core of pro-Isard factions in the CSA government. The Prex is the chief administrator and second-most powerful being after Leon. The Viceprexes administer different departments in the actual bureaucracy that manages the CSA. Go'thal and Lanchenzoor have been quietly consolidating other pro-Republic figures into an alliance."

"So let me get this straight," Leia said, "You want us to take sides in some kind of... political warfare?"

"I imagine they'd call it 'corporate warfare.'" said Fey'lya. "Even in politics, they conduct themselves like business-beings."

Leia wasn't sure who could be more ruthless, politicians or captains of industry. Either way she didn't like this. "Borsk, are we supposed to back some kind of coup, help Go'thal replace Leon as head of the CSA?"

"Like I just told you, this is *corporate* warfare. If he can get enough votes from the Direx, Go'thal can impeach Leon and take control of the CSA legally."

"And then what?" asked Beruss. "Will they cut all ties with Coruscant, with Zsinj, and only sell products to the Republic?"

“That is the goal, yes.”

Fey’lya leaned back in his chair and let the possibilities play through everyone’s minds. Through her revulsion at dealing with such an immoral organization as the CSA, she had to admit its practical advantages. The Republic needed credits and resources. More than that, the CSA was an institution, aligned with the Empire but never truly subject to it. By gaining the CSA as an ally, the Republic could further solidify its image as a force for political and economic stability instead of a band of terrorists like Imperial propaganda claimed.

But still, Leia felt revolted at the thought. Looking at Mon Mothma, she said, “If we strike a deal with the CSA, that means we endorse it. That means we endorse *everything* it does- its environmental abuse, its secret police, its stubborn refusal to grant even basic rights to its citizens-”

“Those are things that can be negotiated,” Fey’lya insisted. “I’ve communicated with Go’tal and Viceprex Lanchenzoor extensively on this matter. They are very willing to institute internal reforms, liberalizing reforms, within the CSA on condition of an economic alliance with us, and protection from Imperial reprisals.”

Ackbar cleared his throat. “If we are going to guarantee the Corporate Sector, that will take many ships, ships I am not certain we have at the moment.”

“If we have the CSA on our side, we can start building ships at double the rate we are now, maybe triple.”

“And how do we know this is secure?” Leia insisted. “For all we know, this could be some kind of elaborate Imperial trap.”

“If the Prex and Viceprexes shows themselves to be a simple tool of Isard,” B’thog reasoned, “They drop all pretense of the CSA being an independent organization. I would say this is unlikely. They would discredit themselves and their business efforts.”

“The idea of factions on the Direx fighting each other is credible enough,” Beruss commented.

Leia sighed and said, “Even if we can trust Go’tal and Lanchenzoor, to a *point*, I still don’t like this. We fought to free thousands of worlds from the Empire. I can’t believe

we'd just sign over thousands more to the CSA for economic reasons. That's how *we* would discredit *ourselves*."

"I understand your concerns, Princess," Fey'lya said. "But the Republic is a political entity now, and politics always involve compromise. Just look at the delegation we sent to the Pentastar Alignment. We agreed on that, all of us, because giving some concessions to Grand Moff Kaine was worthwhile to remove one warlord from our enemies list. Call it a trade-off if you want, but with the CSA we're looking at trading far fewer systems for far greater gain."

Leia wasn't a fan of those concessions either. Right before Burke's briefing they'd taken the vote, and only she and Kerrithrarr had objected. Everyone else had approved the plan to grant temporary amnesty to listed Imperial war criminals taking shelter within the systems claimed by Kaine's government. In exchange they'd share intelligence on Zsinj, but it still made her feel guilty.

"I also do not doubt the trustworthiness of Go'thal," Fey'lya said. "That is why I'm volunteering to travel with a team of aides to the Corporate Sector and conduct interviews face-to-face."

"You may trust her, but what about everyone on her staff?" asked Ackbar.

"If Go'thal, Lanchenzoor, or any of the other Viceprexes are caught in these negotiations, their lives are forfeit. They're taking bigger risks in this than we are. Now it is our turn to convince them that we're serious."

Fey'lya fixed his violet eyes on Mon Mothma, almost as if he were daring her to call the matter to a vote.

The woman took a deep breath, then said, "I want to put this issue to further study. Princess Leia, please work with Councilor Fey'lya and his staff. Review his notes and together, I want you both to come up with a proposal for negotiations."

"*Me?*" Leia balked.

Mon Mothma nodded seriously. "Please, Leia. I want to hear from you *both*."

Leia swallowed, and knew she meant it. She was probably hoping that, by forcing her and Fey'lya to work together on the same project, they might end up producing some kind of

ideal compromise. Leia wasn't sure about that herself, but when she saw the trust in Mon Mothma's eyes, she had nodded in agreement and braced herself for whatever might come.

"Fierfek, what a *mess*," Sho-tev Ekrhine said as he slumped in his chair, watching the flash of gun-cam footage recorded by one of *Emancipator's* Y-wings during the battle at Bandomeer.

Since they didn't officially exist, the team they called Alpha Black had no ready-room to sit in, so instead they'd gathered in Admiral Drayson's private quarters, which was one of the few cabins on *Home One* big enough to fit six beings and two cases of Brentaal beer the admiral had shipped directly up from the cruiser's cantina. Drayson wasn't much of a drinker- health nut- but Jekk Karr seemed half-determined to finish one case all by himself, Ekrhine the other.

Reyan Dey'rylan didn't blame them. Watching the mess at Bandomeer was enough to make anyone want to drink themselves into a stupor.

Eventually, when it became clear nobody could it take anymore, Drayson scooped up the remote and turned the holo off. With a sigh, he leaned against the bulkhead and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well," he said, "Insightful comments?"

"You mean aside from that being horrific?" Karr asked from his spot on the sofa beside Devin Torr.

For a second nobody had anything better to say; then Kasck Fre'leir, thoughtfully, said, "Makati likes moving his forces in stages. He lets his enemy *think* they have control over the battlefield, then springs one surprise after another."

"The way he used the minefield to give cover to his attacking ships was creative too," Torr added.

"Let's not forget the part about *throwing* mines," Ekrhine grunted and took another gulp of beer.

"What I noticed," said Dey'rylan, "Is how little he had in the way of causalities. He didn't just throw ships out there. He never deliberately sacrifices any of his ships or used them as cannon fodder like Grunger or Pitta."

"All our intel on Makati says he's respected by his troops," Drayson said. "Compared to some of the other grand admirals, I can see why."

"Okay then," Karr sighed. "So he's a great tactician and his soldiers likes him. He's probably got a pet tooka cat that loves him too. What about his *weaknesses*?"

"What about family?" Ekrhine asked Drayson.

The admiral shook his head. "No wife, no children. No mistresses either, not that we can find."

"What about parents? Siblings?" Dey'rylan asked. Makati wasn't that old for a human, little over fifty standard years.

"No siblings. His homeworld was wrecked during the Clone Wars and all his family died then, or shortly thereafter."

"Any close friends? Professional allies? Drinking buddies?"

"If you're asking who we can use against him, I don't know if there's anyone. He's never had a reputation for women or vice like Takel. Some of our reports have described Makati as... 'monastic.'"

"So he eats, breathes, and probably defecates for the glory of the Empire," Karr sighed. "You know, after all dealing with guys ike Grunger and Pitta, I had a hard time believing the Empire had *any* true believers."

"There *are* some," Torr said knowingly, "Crazy as it sounds."

"One thing's for sure," Kasck said, "We don't want to fight him head on again."

A statement like that, delivered with a dark glower, would have raised alarm in any other group, but in that room, all it got was a thoughtful silence.

Drayson said, "I've talked with Admiral Ackbar and General Cracken. They've both agreed that after Bandomeer, we should focus on less... official ways to get rid of Makati."

"You mean assassinate him," Kasck bore his canines.

"I mean assassinate him."

"About time," grunted Ekrhine. "What about the Provo Council?"

"Mon Mothma gave me personal permission to establish Alpha Black. She may speak softly, but she has durasteel in her spine."

"And the rest of them?"

"They'll know what they have to know."

"So in other words, what we tell them?"

Drayson nodded.

"I'd feel a lot better about this if we had a plan to get close to this guy," Dey'rylan sighed. "Admiral, do we know where he is now? I'm guessing he's not at Bandomeer any more."

"We believe he's inbound to Coruscant, if he hasn't returned already. And as you know, Isard's been frightfully good at purging our agents in the capital."

"So in other words, we're right back where we started," Karr shook his head.

"What about the *other* grand admiral?" suggested Torr. "Why don't we target Grant?"

"Grant doesn't stray far from Imperial Center either." Drayson seemed to hesitate, then added, "However, he did recently go on a diplomatic mission to the Pentastar Alignment."

"To see Kaine?" Ekrhine sat upright in his chair. "Did we know this in advance?"

Drayson gave a little sigh. "Not until he showed up on Kaine's flagship along with the other delegates."

"Other delegates?" Dey'rylan frowned. This sounded like something Drayson had known for a while but had kept from them. Usually it was the other way around, and while Dey'rylan knew the admiral had good reasons for what he did, it still felt like a small betrayal.

"The Provo Council sent someone to attend a conference with Kaine, Grant, and delegates from Zsinj and Teradoc's forces. Kaine wanted to set ground rules with his neighbors, to keep himself isolated."

"So we're *negotiating* with Imps now?" Dey'rylan asked. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about that.

"If Kaine qualifies as one," Drayson allowed.

"So if we had people on the same ship as Grant, why didn't we try and kill him there?" Ekrhine asked. "You or Cracken must have slipped someone on the diplomat's staff, right?"

"There was... a presence," Drayson said carefully. "However, it was judged that killing Grant on *Reaper* would cost us our delegates, and maybe even start a war with Kaine. We can't afford that right now."

It was the smart choice, probably the right one. Dey'rylan just hoped letting Grant live wouldn't come back to bite them later.

"The point is," Drayson told them, "Right now Fleet Command sees Makati as the bigger threat, and I agree. You gentlebeings have added four to your kill roster so far. If anyone can accomplish this, I believe it's you."

"While I appreciate the vote of confidence," said Karr, "Where do you expect us to start?"

Drayson thought for one moment, then another, and finally said, "I'll get to you on that. Soon."

Nobody tried prying. They all knew there was no arguing with the admiral when he had secrets to keep. It was, after all, his job.

When they pulled Baron Fel out of the bacta tank, his brother-in-law was there to watch. Fel reflected that it had been a wisely calculated move on Wedge's part. He wanted to show both personal and professional support but didn't want Fel to be embarrassed by having all the Rouges watch as he dried his near-naked body off and changed into a plain black jumpsuit.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better," Wedge said with a grin once Fel was dried and dressed. "I heard you got knocked around bad when you went EV. Not surprising, considering the firefight we were in."

"I suppose. I don't really remember it that well. But the EmDee droid says that's normal."

Wedge didn't ask him what happened right before he was hit, just like he didn't ask if Fel had even been shot down before. Instead, as they began walking back toward the barracks Fel shared with six other pilots, he began filling Fel in on the rest of the Battle of Bandomeer. The EmDee droid had already told him that Makati had won the battle, claiming the planet and beating back two different enemies in the process.

"Because the Emperor pulled him from front line duty, we've never really known what Makati was capable of until now," Wedge said.

"He didn't appoint his grand admiral for no reason."

"I know. I just wish we hadn't learned that the hard way."

"I don't suppose you know what happens next."

"We have no orders. The Provo Council had a full meeting earlier today, but I don't know if they've decided anything."

Fel gave a little sigh. "You're lucky, you know, having such a small group making decisions for you, right on this very ship. The Empire was never this.... Tight-knit."

"The Council has plenty of disagreements."

"True. But at the end of the day, you're all on the same side." He sighed again and stopped before the door to the barracks. He didn't hear anyone inside; it was afternoon by *Home One's* internal chrono, so they were probably all elsewhere.

"What I mean to say is... In the Empire, every decision is made by a hierarchy. Every relationship is about masters and servants. Even if the master and servant like and trust each other, they can never be friends. But here, in your Republic... It's all very different."

Wedge put on a soft smile. "I've never heard it put quite that way. I hope you're right."

"As do I." Fel glanced inside the barracks, to make sure it was empty. In a low voice, he said, "Have you heard anything about Syal?"

Wedge's smile wilted. He shook his head.

"Have you *asked*?"

"Of course I did. I talked to Cracken. He got nothing from the Boudolayz data-dump. I'm sorry."

"Then I'm sorry too." He raised one hand in a weak salute. "I'll see you later, Commander."

Wedge nodded, turned, and left. Fel walked into the barracks and sat down on his bed. Despite having done nothing but float in bacta for two days he still felt tired. He'd heard that was normal for people who'd just come out of the tank but it still felt wrong. He felt he should do something.

He rose and went over to this personal locker on the opposite wall. He input his code and opened it. Everything

was as he'd left it: the folded clothes, the small mirror on the inside wall, the magnetic New Republic crest pinned to the back.

Then he noticed it: a wadded-up piece of flimsy, resting atop his folded trousers.

He picked it up and felt something inside but didn't unwrap it. He'd hoped what he'd just told Wedge was true; if not, then he had as little chance of finding a place here as he had in the Empire.

He unfolded the flimsy and saw a tiny data-card inside. He held it up between forefinger and thumb, then glanced at the flimsy. Something was scrawled on there, in hand, with black ink. The handwriting was small, compact, and precise, as he'd expected from Devin Torr. It said:

You didn't get this from me.

And I'm sorry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN **CORUSCANT**

After all of it, Octavian Grant and Afsheen Makati found themselves right back where they began, in Isard's lair, buried deep inside Imperial Palace. This time she seemed pleased, as much as Isard ever seemed pleased. Grant would have felt better about that, but he knew it wasn't he who had done the most to buoy her mood.

"Admiral Rogriss is currently overseeing operations on Bandomeer while *Aurora* undergoes repairs," Makati was explaining. "Once our people are fully installed in its defense force, it should be safe to bring him and *Aurora* back into the field. The planet itself escaped the battle undamaged, so there's no need to expend credits and time on repairing infrastructure."

"How long until we're ready to start exporting ionite?" Isard asked as four of her crimson guards stood like robed statues behind her, peering at the two grand admirals through faceless mirror-black visor-slits.

"As it is, Madam, we can start right now. If you want to make sure our defenses are in order, no more than a week."

"Excellent. What is the status of *Steadfast*?"

"Repairs are already complete. She sustained much less damage."

Isard nodded curtly and swing her gaze back on Grant. He'd already repeated for her the important points of the official report he'd submitted, relaying back Kaine's requests for limited cooperation as well as his personal evaluation of the Pentastar Alignment and its leader. He'd been honest in

everything except the deal he'd attempted to make with Temius Holt. As yet he'd received no other word from the man about further cooperation, but it was too soon to tell if he'd been rejected.

"Octavian," she said, "I would like your personal opinion on a matter."

He chose to take that as a sign he'd recovered just a bit of her good graces. "Anything, Madam Director."

"Now that Bandomeer has been taken from Zsinj, where do you recommend we allocate further attention?"

"Are you asking where to attack, Madam?" He tried to keep from sounding hopeful.

"I'm asking for your opinion."

"Well, Madam, assuming you want to accept Grand Moff Kaine's offer, and assuming you want to avoid hostilities with Teradoc, then we have three options. We can press the offense against Zsinj, we can select a new warlord to fight, or we can take aim at the Rebels."

Her red-blue gaze shifted to Makati. "And your opinion, Afsheen?"

The other man didn't have to think about it. "At this time? I think we should discipline another rogue warlord."

Isard looked between them and smiled. To Grant it seemed like a lizard attempting a grin. "I'm very glad when we can come to an agreement. In fact, I've already selected targets for each of you."

Each of you. Three words made Grant's heart flutter like a stupid schoolboy. Finally he'd be able to *prove* himself, to make Isard recognize his worth.

"Afsheen," she said, "Your next target is Inquisitor Jerec."

Grant could see the light in Makati's eyes as he said, almost calmly "As you wish, Madam Director."

Isard took two steps toward him. "I know you want to clear this galaxy of Force-using trouble-makers. After your actions at Bandomeer I think you've earned the right to do so. However, I have one strict condition."

"Of course."

"Kill Jerec, but bring me his super star destroyer."

Grant thought he saw Makati's jaw tighten. The grand admiral nodded and said, "As you command."

"I do," she said seriously, leaving no question that if he didn't bring back *Vengeance*, all the good will he'd won at Bandomeer would be forfeit. Grant didn't envy him the task; not just because of the high risk, but because he'd had the displeasure of Inquisitor Jerec's company in the past. Makati had a fanatic's relish for killing Jedi, something he'd picked up after they'd wasted his homeworld in the Clone Wars. Grant was no fan of mystic cultists either, but as a rule he tried to stay as far away from them as possible.

"As you know," Isard was saying, "I've been tracking Jerec's movements for some time. He left the Sullust System a week ago. According to intelligence I received yesterday, *Vengeance* has settled in orbit over a planet called Ruusan."

"Ruusan?" Makati frowned.

She plucked a data-card from the breast of her red uniform, reached out, and slipped it inside Makati's white one, right next to the slim silver cylinder of his comlink.

"Review this information tonight, then get back to me tomorrow," she said. "There's no telling how long he'll be at Ruusan, so we have no time to waste."

"Understood, Madam."

Isard nodded curtly and turned her ice-and-fire eyes on Grant. She stepped up to the other grand admiral and said, "I've chosen your target as well."

Grant nodded and waited.

"Six months ago, Delak Krennel humiliated the Empire. I want him dead."

His first thought was how easy it would be: After betraying Isard, killing Pestage, and taking the late regent's possessions for himself, Krennel only had a handful of destroyers and a few systems in his so-called Ciutric Hegemony. His second thought was that a better target, a more *important* target, would have been the warlords hiding in the Deep Core. They were far closer to Imperial Center than ever Grunger had gotten, and not even Grant knew what kind of warships and weapons they'd taken from the Emperor's storehouses hidden amidst all the twisting hyperlanes in the galaxy's center.

But one look at Isard told him there was no point in arguing. Her hatred for Krennel was personal. He tried to console

himself that, once Krennel was done with, he'd have earned a significant chunk of Isard's good will. Especially if Makati had problems subduing Jerec's *Vengeance*.

"As you wish, Madam," he said. "Is there any information you have for me to review?"

"Of course." Isard took out a second data-chip and tucked it into his uniform. "Because Krennel isn't going anywhere, and because you'll have whole inhabited systems to take, I'll give you two days to present me with a battle plan. Understood?"

"Yes, Madam."

She stepped back and looked her grand admirals over. "Then you're dismissed. Both of you."

Makati was surprised how good it felt to be back in his penthouse in Imperial City. He'd never indulged much in luxury and generally preferred the utilitarian directness of a warship, but somehow it felt satisfying to return to that well-appointed penthouse with its splendid view of the capital skyline. Maybe that was because now, after Bandomeer, he felt like he'd earned it.

When Makati arrived, he turned on the lights and began removing his uniform. F-4GR came shuffling across the floor, but before the droid could offer to fix him a drink Makati waved a hand, saying, "It's all right, Forger. I don't need anything right now."

"I understand, sir. However, I was going to tell you that a high-priority message arrived for you while you were away."

Makati frowned. "From whom?"

"I don't know. It was heavily encrypted, and very small."

"Small?"

"Yes, sir. The data package was too tiny to contain even a single holo-image. I believe it may have been a—"

"A freq to call back on."

Makati was already stalking toward the communications console in his desk. He started up the console and saw the message F-4GR had referred to. He entered his personal decryption key to open the contents. Sure enough, it contained a sequence that, when plugged into his comm console, would bounce a message back at the sender.

He had absolutely no idea who was trying to contact him, but there was only one way to find out. He entered the new code into his system and sent out a signal.

The response was faster than he'd expected. After less than a minute, a holo-image sprung to life in front of him. He was taken aback: it was a head-and-shoulders image of a humanoid. Even with the blue tint of the holo, he could make out the pupil-less glow of his eyes, the pale color of his uniform, and the shine of the braided epaulets on his shoulders.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn," Makati said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Grand Admiral Makati," the alien nodded politely.

Makati's mind reeled. The last he'd heard, Thrawn had been exiled to the Unknown Regions after losing a scuffle in the Emperor's court with Grand Admiral Tigellinus. There had been plenty of rumors attached to his departure, some even claiming that he hadn't been exiled at all, that he was instead on some secret mission for the Emperor. That fact that Palpatine had entrusted him with hunting down and killing Demetrius Zaarin after the rouge grand admiral's coup attempt had settled that argument.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn," he repeated, "Am I to understand that you have returned from uncharted space?"

"That is correct." His tone was flat, his eyes unreadable.

"I see. And you have gone to lengths to contact me."

"Do not worry about your loyalty to Director Isard. I have already met her in-person and come to an agreement."

"I see," Makati said, not seeing at all.

"I wanted to start by congratulating you, Admiral, on your victory at Bandomeer. It was most impressive."

Suddenly it all made sense. "Isard had you review my battle plans beforehand."

"That's correct."

"I should have known. Those comments were so unlike her. They were too..." He wanted to say *helpful*. "In any case, I owe you for your advice. The Starwing fighters were very effective, as you'd said they'd be. And to *throw* mines at enemy cruisers... I admit I balked at that."

"The victory is still yours," Thrawn said. "It was your idea to attack the enemy through the minefields, and to draw

Zsinj's forces into two chokepoints. I merely wanted to fine-tune your approach and make certain it worked."

"It worked. It worked very well." Makati hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Are you working another mission for Isard now, a secret one?" He wanted to ask if Thrawn had been working in secret for Palpatine these past few years, but the fact that the alien was speaking to him now, serving the Empire again, was verification enough of that.

"I am. And I was wondering if you could help me."

"Of course. I do owe you a debt."

"Don't think of debts, Admiral. We all serve the Empire in our own ways."

"That's very true. But may I ask why you haven't contacted Isard directly about this?"

A wry smile tugged at Thrawn's lips. "Do you trust the regent in all things, Admiral?"

There was no way to know how loyal Thrawn really was to Isard. The only safe choice was to dodge the question.

"As you said, we all serve the Empire. If I can help you to that end, I will."

"Very good." Thrawn nodded slightly. "Admiral, do you know the current whereabouts of High Inquisitor Jerec?"

Makati blinked. Maybe he really was talking with Isard. Maybe he had spies in the regent's guard. Maybe he was just a really good guesser. Again, there was no way to know.

"Do you intend to go after Jerec yourself?"

"I need to find him. I have no intention of engaging him a full military battle. I don't currently have the resources to dispose of his super star destroyer. But I ask again, do you know the location of *Vengeance*?"

"We have been... tracking that vessel. According to our most recent intelligence, he's taken it to an isolated planet called Ruusan."

"If you'd provide me with the coordinates, I'd be very appreciative. Also, if you can provide me with any technical data on *Vengeance* I would also be grateful."

"Why? You just said you don't plan to fight Jerec."

"I'm not going to ally with him either, I assure you. I merely have some... personal business to settle with the

High Inquisitor. I do not want to fight him, but I'll arrive at Ruusan prepared to."

Only a fool would do otherwise. Makati hesitated, wondering whether to tell Thrawn about the task Isard had just set him on. "Admiral, I can give you this information on the condition that you submit a detailed report on your confrontation with Jerec after it is complete."

"Very well. I understand that you'd want to be informed."

Maybe he really *did* have a spy in Isard's court. "Understand *how*?"

"Your antipathy to the Jedi cult is well-known. I assumed that if anyone in the Empire would be keeping track of Jerec it would be you."

It was the simple, obvious answer, and Makati chose to trust it. "Once I find the data on *Vengeance*, can I transmit it on this frequency?"

"Please," Thrawn nodded. "Also, I have another request."

"Tell me what it is." Makati still wasn't making promises.

"I was wondering whether you were informed about the dealings of our late comrade, Martio Batch."

Makati frowned. He'd only met Grand Admiral Batch on a handful of occasions; like Zaarin, he'd been more interested in weapons research than either diplomacy or combat; unlike Zaarin, he'd never been brash enough to try to rebel. Instead, he'd quietly worked on important cloaking device research.

"According to Isard," he averred, "Batch was killed by his crew, who then joined Harrsk in the Deep Core."

"And did they take it with them, Admiral?"

"It?"

"I think you know. The program Batch was working on before Rebel terrorists destroyed the super star destroyer *Terror* and drove him into hiding."

Thrawn truly was well-informed. "You're speaking of the TIE Phantom project."

"I need stygium cloaking devices. Do you know, Admiral, whether all of them were truly destroyed on *Terror*?"

This must have been what Thrawn didn't want to talk to Isard about. He had a reputation for innovative use of rare technology, and she'd never trust him with a stygium cloaking device. Thrawn had forced the other grand admiral

into an awkward position and almost surely knew it. Makati fixed his face into a scowl and hoped it hid his confusion. A single squadron's worth of TIE Phantoms *had* survived the terrorist attack, but they hadn't been deployed since. The crystals used to fuel their cloaking devices were extremely rare, and none of the handful of senior command who knew of their existence, least of all Makati, had thought up a mission worth risking those incredible, precious ships.

But Thrawn, apparently, had.

If Makati handed over command of Shadow Squadron to Thrawn, and if those ships were lost, then Isard would surely take it out on him. All the favor he'd won at Bandomeer would vanish in an instant; he might even end up with the same fate as Miltin Takel: running from Isard for fear of his life, right into death by another's hand.

However, he could also end up like that anyway if he didn't bring her *Vengeance* intact.

"Twelve TIE Phantoms are still in existence," Makati said. "Would you use them against Jerec? Or is this part of some other plan?"

"I would take them to Ruusan with me. Once that mission is finished, I'll gladly return command of them to you."

Makati still scowled. Even if he could trust Thrawn's word, he didn't know if he could trust him to handle Jerec. He didn't know if he could trust *himself*. But in the end, they were both servants of the Empire, as Thrawn had said. Trust was the only thing binding them together.

"Admiral," Makati said, "Ysanne Isard has tasked me with getting her *Vengeance*."

"Is that so?" Thrawn raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. And I would very much prefer Jerec to be dead when I bring it to her. I believe- I *hope*- we can help each other get what we want."

Thrawn seemed to consider him for a long moment with those glowing eyes. Then he said, "I hope so as well, but Admiral, I am on a very limited timetable. I need those TIE Phantoms and I need them now."

"Will you use them against *Vengeance*?"

"As much as I have to. I will help you any way I can in exchange for their usage."

It seemed as fair a trade as Makati could hope for. He nodded once and allowed a tiny smile.

The star destroyer *Grey Wolf* sat in empty space on the edge of the Coruscant Sector. Captain Dagon Niriz tried not to look pensive as he paced back and forth across the destroyer's command deck, waiting for the grand admiral to emerge from his personal quarters. He'd come to trust Thrawn implicitly over the past four years; he knew that sometimes the grand admiral brought him to witness critical conversations, like with Isard or the Noghri Maitrakh; other times he had his discussions in private, and he knew Thrawn always had a good reason for it.

Still, whoever Thrawn was talking with, he was having a *long* conversation.

He was about to order Lieutenant Maxis to run weapons diagnostics, just to fill the time, when his comlink buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and said, "This is the captain."

"You may come to my quarters now," Thrawn said simply, and the transmission ended.

Niriz tried to look calm before his crew as he walked off the bridge and made his way to Thrawn's chambers. When he stepped inside it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness in the room; the only light came from the holo-projected image of some statue, apparently made from old stone. It stood tall as a man and shaped like one, though the skin was painted red and his face was twisted in an angry, fanged snarl. He wore some elaborate ceremonial costume that Niriz couldn't recognize, though he was sure Thrawn did.

The Grand Admiral sat back in his command chair, hands steepled in front of him, staring at the statue with narrowed red eyes. He claimed that by studying the art of a culture he could understand its thought and know how to defeat it. Niriz had been skeptical at first, but had learned to accept it in time.

He cleared his throat and said, "What race created this lovely specimen, sir?"

Without taking his eyes from the holo-image, Thrawn said, "This is a statue of a being called a Sith."

Niriz frowned. The name was familiar, vaguely. Something to do with the Jedi. "He doesn't look very pleasant."

"The Sith were initially a race native to the Outer Rim. They were conquered by a Jedi splinter group, though in time their name came to be associated with that faction."

That sparked old memories; some time when he was young, before the Emperor expunged all public memory of the Force-using cult that had secretly started the Clone Wars and tried to destroy the Republic, he'd heard about the Sith as the Jedi's ancient enemy.

Then, finally it fell into place. "Is Inquisitor Jerec a Sith?"

"He has embraced the tenants of their religion in practice if not in name. This is a replica of a piece of Sith statuary constructed at their capital on Ziost, some five thousand years ago. It was later added by Darth Vader to his personal collection. It says quite a bit about them, doesn't it, Captain?"

"Indeed," Niriz mumbled.

"The predatory expression, the passionate red skin. And the clothes, of course: outward signs of power and even opulence. To be a Sith and immerse one's self in that aspect of the Force is to crave power and influence over all beings around you. And of course, showing off one's power is a critical part of *keeping* power."

That didn't seem true of Thrawn himself; the grand admiral had always been averse to pageantry and petty power displays, not to mention scrupulously private. As far as Niriz knew, he was the only crew member Thrawn ever invited into his private chambers.

"And of course," the grand admiral continued, "When a being drapes himself in finery he mimics those whose position he covets. The same goes for black robes and needless shows of dominance. Inquisitor Jerec long craved to stand at the Emperor's side but could never oust Darth Vader. In stealing the Noghri, he thinks he is claiming something that has always been his due."

Thrawn shifted his head to look at the captain. "A being like Jerec knows his power comes from how others see him. He relishes their awe and obedience. And we can use that against him."

Niriz knew better than to ask whom Thrawn had spoken with. "Do we know where Jerec is now, sir?"

“Ruusan.”

“Ruusan,” Niriz echoed. He didn’t want to admit he had no idea where the planet was.

“You’ll find it in the nav computer, Coreward of Hutt Space,” Thrawn assured him, “But we have one more place to stop first. Thankfully, it’s very close by. Take us into the Coruscant system, with a heading for Improcco.”

As far as Niriz knew there were only a handful of moons swinging around that gas giant. “Right away, sir.”

As he turned for the exit, Thrawn called, “Captain, do you want to know why?”

Niriz stopped, turned, and looked back at Thrawn. “I assumed you’d tell me when you thought it was necessary.”

“I’ll tell you now. We have been granted permission to use a squadron of experimental TIE fighters developed by Grand Admiral Batch. They’ve been held in reserve as a secret facility on Improcco’s fifth moon. These vessels utilize stygium cloaking devices.”

“Stygium?” Niriz frowned. He’d spent almost a year assisting Thrawn with a project to develop a cloaking device fueled by hibridium, only to have the technology stolen by Zaarin during the traitor’s ill-fated coup attempt.

“The Emperor believed that having two forces working toward the same goal could produce illuminating results. Where he tasked us to create the hibridium device, he tasked Batch to create a workable cloaking device using stygium crystals. Rebel sabotage foiled the project, though not before producing results that, frankly, humble our own.”

“Did he find a way around the double-blind dilemma?” The hibridium cloaking device they’d developed had been cumbersome, only suited for large vessels, but its biggest flaw was that it blocked those inside a cloaked ship from seeing outside just as it stopped those outside the field from looking in.

Thrawn smiled slightly. “He did. I believe this technology will be critical against Jerec.”

“Jerec, sir? But he’s...” Niriz stopped, hesitated.

“Yes?”

“I’ve never met him in person, sir, but some say he’s physically blind. Others say he fakes it. Others still say he

can't see with his eyes but uses the Force." He didn't add that he'd thought the last bit preposterous and terrifying at the same time.

"From my experience," Thrawn said, "I believe the last are correct. And I also suspect, though I'm not certain, that he will be able to sense our pilots even when cloaked."

Niriz frowned. "Then sir... Why go through the trouble of obtaining stygium cloaking devices?"

Thrawn didn't explain. He just pointed a white-gloved finger at the statue and gave one of his rare, tight smiles.

This time, Grant met Colonel Morrell on the middle of the Kitrani Rainbow Bridge. Lit up in ever-shifting colors in the night, the bridge spanned out for a mile on either side of them. Pedestrians milled about, enjoying the view the elevated walkway provided them as it cut over the heart of Imperial City, suspended between the tethers of two skyhooks that rose invisibly through the night sky and into the planet's orbit. The Rainbow Bridge was a recent addition to Imperial Center's tourist attractions; it had, in fact, been thrown up just a year ago, on Sate Pestage's orders, apparently because he wanted to give the capital's populace a shiny new toy to distract them from how badly his Empire was crumbling.

Still, as he leaned against the railing and felt fast wind rustle his hair, Grant had to admit it provided quite a view. Imperial Palace sat luminous and imposing in the distance; he could, too, make out the low dome of the old Senate building and the elegant spires that hosted the most expensive luxury penthouses in the entire galaxy, including the one Isard had given him.

For a moment, the old grand admiral almost felt like a tourist himself. Then Morrell, standing beside him and watching the same view, cleared his throat and placed a small data-card on top of the railing.

He took his hand away. Grant casually palmed the card and asked, "What is it this time?"

"An update on Wynssa Starflare, if you're interested."

"Go ahead," he said. Maybe she'd flown to Ciutric. That would be quite a stroke of luck.

"We got another update from the pursuit team. They say the target escaped them at Corsin and grabbed a ship to the Corporate Sector. They're in pursuit.

"The Corporate Sector is a big place. *Where* exactly is she going?"

"The report... doesn't say."

Grant snorted. "The best you can get me are redacted reports?"

"Not redacted. Just... uninformative."

"So the pursuit team doesn't know what planet she's going to?"

"Or they might be leaving it out."

"Why would Isard's pursuit team leave things out?"

"If anything, these updates prove they're *not* Isard's team."

"Then who *are* they and why are they still reporting to her?"

Morrell sighed, held out his hands, and shrugged.

Grant scowled. "This pursuit team, they're telling Isard what they're doing, but not *everything* they're doing... That implies they don't trust her."

"Trust her to do what?"

"To *not* do something. Maybe they're afraid that if they tell her too much, Isard will send her own team into the Corporate Sector and grab Starflare before they can. I'm sure ISB has agents there."

Morrell shrugged again, neither confirming nor denying.

"This pursuit team, they want Starflare and that means they want Baron Fel. But they want Fel for a different reason than Isard, and Isard wants him *dead*..."

He trailed off, thoughts spinning but going nowhere. He was missing an integral piece and had no idea what it was. It gnawed at him, the not-knowing. He wouldn't have ordinarily cared about Starflare but something was going on here, something he couldn't understand and he couldn't bring himself to let it go. Something in his gut told him it was too important to ignore.

He would have to think about it more, because no revelation was coming tonight. He sighed and asked, "Do you have any other gifts for me?"

"Not at the moment. But I'll let you know."

Grant suppressed a sigh. Morrell was loyal, but loyalty didn't always get you what you wanted. Temius Holt wasn't loyal to anyone, not even his employer Teradoc, and Grant wondered if he would be any more useful than Morrell.

"I heard you've got a mission," Morrell said conversationally. Of course he'd have heard of it.

"Indeed," Grant said, and looked at Imperial Palace aglow in the distance.

"I thought you'd be happier, given that you can fight again."

Grant would have thought so too. He didn't know why he felt disappointed with the task of defeating Krennel. It was far better than attending Kaine's pointless conference.

"I don't suppose you know anything about the situation on Ciutric that Isard hasn't already given me."

"Probably not. But I'll look into it a little more."

"Please do."

Cool wind blew across the bridge, whipping Grant's hair and flapping his jacket. A few of the passing civilians gave out little gasps; frightened or exhilarated, he couldn't tell. They seemed very childish to him then.

"If the Rebels ever come to this place," Morrell said, looking over his shoulder at the tourists, "They can kiss this kind of life goodbye."

Grant nodded. He didn't share Makati's ardor about preserving the Core against all enemies, but he agreed with its basic spirit. The Core, and Imperial Center most of all, had been a bastion of order and civilization against chaos for millennia. He had no romance about the virtues of the Empire, but even in its death throes it was surely better than the anarchy the Rebels' alien horde would bring.

Maybe that was why he hadn't taken Kaine's offer immediately. Maybe a part of him, after all these years, still believed in the simple virtue of keeping order against chaos. Or perhaps his motivations were as petty as proving himself to Isard. He wasn't sure of anything. It had been so long since Octavian Grant had truly believed in something, he wasn't sure what it felt like anymore.

CHAPTER NINETEEN **TRIVIGAUNTE**

Syal Antilles knew absolutely nothing about bulk cargo haulers until climbing inside the belly of one. After that, she had to learn fast.

The first task was getting out of the cargo crate she'd stowed away on. To her surprise, that was easier than expected. Whoever had built these things had apparently designed them to be proof against kidnappers and slave-traders, because on the ceiling there was a lever that could be manually pulled to open the door from the inside. It was still hard to get to, and Syal spent over two hours pushing boxes against the wall until she could clamber up them and get to the lever. Once she was there, she found it was partially rusted on its pivot and she had to wrench the thing with two hands before she popped the locked and opened the door.

Nobody immediately noticed the door had cracked open. She took that as a good sign and stayed atop the crates for a while, catching her breath and figuring out how to get down to the bottom of this pile without falling on her head or smashing the child inside her. It was a long, careful climb-down but she made it.

The moment she stepped outside the crate she felt *cold*. All she had were the cloaks on her back; she'd layered up against the chill on Corsin but these had to be significantly cooler. The insides of these cargo haulers must have had some minimal life support- after all, she was breathing oxygen, and she wasn't totally frozen by the vacuum of space- but it wasn't much. She felt miniscule in the cavernous chamber.

Cargo crates identical to the one she'd hidden in formed endless rows on all sides; she couldn't see any walls and the ceiling was high above. The lights were dim too. Most likely, a ship this big only kept the compartments used by the crew- the bridge, the living quarters- fully lit and warm. To save energy, everything else- namely the cargo hold- was kept on minimal support.

On the plus side, that meant she probably didn't have to worry about the ship's security team finding her. On the downside, she and her child would probably freeze to death. Assuming they didn't starve first or start hallucinating from hypoxia. She had no idea how long it would take to crawl from Corsin to the Corporate Sector, especially if they were making detours to avoid battles along the Hydian.

As she huddled against herself, Syal decided what she had to do. The most important thing she needed was warmth. That meant finding a place on the ship with full life support, but minimal people. Maybe a supplemental cabin for storing the crew's affects, or maybe someplace where they kept food. If she could get access to a data-panel and get a full schematic, it would help immensely.

A door or an access panel; those were what she needed. The only way to find one was to keep moving.

All these cargo-crates seemed to be aligned in straight rows, so if she walked in one direction far enough she'd eventually hit a wall. She couldn't get a sense of the ship's momentum, so without being to tell which direction was forward and which was aft, she simply picked a direction and kept walking straight.

As she walked, she fished a hand into her cloak and handled her remaining belongings. She still had the ID cards she'd taken from the dead NRI and ISB agents, though she didn't know what good that would do. She doubted a bunch of cargo-haulers would believe a disheveled, tired, very pregnant woman was actually one of Isard's intel agents. She also had the second hold-out blaster pistol she'd taken from Renb; the one from Soveni had blown up along with the hover-bus on Corsin. Or maybe that had been Renb's and this was Soveni's. She couldn't remember, and it bothered

her. It was irrational, but she felt she owed it to the dead to at least keep their weapons straight.

Either way, she wondered what she could do with the gun besides shoot people. There might have been a way to cause the power-pack of heat up without exploding. It wouldn't give much warmth, but it would be better than another. Soontir might have known a trick, but her weapons instruction was too meager.

When she finally found a wall, she was disappointed. The tall, plain, unmarked bulkhead seemed to stretch out to infinity in either direction. In better lighting she might have been able to spot an access panel, but the further away the wall stretched the deeper it sunk into the twilight gloom the storage chamber was kept in.

So without another recourse, she picked a direction and kept walking, one hand trailing along the bulkhead. She realized that in addition to being cold she was also hungry; she had no idea how long it had been since her escape from Corsin and she hadn't had much to eat while on the planet.

She was so dazed from hunger and weariness that she didn't notice the access panel until her hand bumped against it. She stopped walking and looked down at it: just a simple box, a half-meter across, with a metal cover lowered over its face. There was no lock on the cover, so she pulled it up, exposing a dormant screen and keypad. If she needed a code to access it, then everything had been pointless. Thankfully, the screen lit up with the stab of a button. The user interface was simple and utilitarian: it offered her a variety of options, including access to the cargo manifest, a direct comm line to the bridge, and a schematic of the freighter.

She chose the last option. As expected, this ship- called *Trivigaunte*, apparently- consisted of three massive cargo chambers and a much smaller forward section in which the crew was housed. The schematic showed her location in the starboard cargo chamber, which was basically on the exact opposite end of the hold from the crew section.

Just her luck. Syal cradled her stomach and leaned against the cold bulkhead, wondering if this could get any worse.

And then, almost one cue, a voice said behind her, "Put your hands in the air and turn around."

Syal froze with one hand propping her against the wall. The voice said again, soft and steady, "Hands in the air and turn around, Miss."

She wondered if she could grab her gun without him noticing. She already had one hand on her stomach, close to the hold-out pistol. She had no idea how the crew of *Trivigaunte* would react to a stowaway; she didn't think they'd use lethal force right away but even a stun blast could harm the child inside her.

"I won't ask you again, Miss."

She took a deep breath and turned around. He'd somehow sneaked up just a meter behind her: Even in the dim lighting she could make out the features on his dark face. She let out a tiny gasp of recognition: she'd seen that face before, in the café on Corsin.

Through her shock, a small part of Syal was amazed at how many ways her life found to get worse.

"Hands on your head," the man said. Breath puffed in front of his face.

Shaking slightly from the cold, Syal put both hands on the back of her head. The man took another step closer but didn't lower his pistol.

"Lady, I am impressed," he said as he switched his gun to a one-handed grip and began lightly frisking her.

"Be careful," she grunted as his hands brushed her stomach.

"Don't worry. I'm not looking to harm your cargo." He found her cards, both the ISB and NRI ones. He took them out and dangled them in front of his face. "Never should have grabbed these, lady. It's how we tracked you."

"How did-"

"It doesn't matter" He stuffed them into his pocket and resumed frisking her. It didn't take him long to find her other blaster. "You might be an amateur, but you're still impressive, lady. How'd you blow up that bus?"

"I had another gun," she said weakly. "Overloaded the power pack."

"Neat trick. They teach you that in acting school?"

Her heart fell further. Somehow, stupidly, she'd been hoping this man and his friends didn't know who she really was.

"Something like that. Where are the rest of them?"

"The rest of who?" He stuffed the hold-out blaster into his other pocket and resumed his two-handed grip of the service pistol.

"There were five of you. I thought I distracted you with the bus, but..."

"You did. I barely got aboard before this thing lifted off. That little fireshow you set off hurt two of my friends."

After a second she asked, "Did I kill anyone?"

"I don't think so. Busted some up really bad though." He lowered the tip of his gun slightly. "Would that bother you, killing someone?"

"I've done it before." She tried to sound confident and failed.

"Doesn't sound like you enjoyed it. I guess that's the job for people like your husband. And me, for that matter." He lowered his gun a little. "But as you might've guessed, we were charged with getting you alive."

"Isard will never get Soontir."

"What makes you think we work for Isard?" He might have been smiling a little. In this dim light it was hard to tell.

"Who else would you be with?" She allowed a faint hope. "The New Republic?"

He shook his head and killed it. "Call us a third party."

"Mercenaries?"

"No. The whole story's above my grade, lady, so don't ask for it. But we don't want to hurt you. Or your husband."

She started lowering her hands. He didn't kick up his gun again. "What happens now?"

"Now we get out of this cold-box and find a comm system so I can let my friends know where to pick us up."

She nodded toward the schematic on the access panel behind her. "We'd better starting walking. It's clear across the hold."

The man edged closer until he could see her screen. "Well, so it is," he said as he tapped a few buttons and looked over the map, then brought up the ship's registry information.

When he was finally done he looked back at her and wagged the tip of his pistol. "You go first."

She was expecting that. It least he didn't tell her to keep her hands in the air. She cupped her swelling stomach in both hands and started walking.

Daric LaRone kept telling himself it could have been a lot worse.

Yes, they were down Brightwater. Yes, Marcross was laid up in his bunk with a bacta cast over his leg and wouldn't be fully ambulatory any time in the near future. Yes, Grave was beaten up too (though at least he could walk). And yes, they'd lost Wynssa Starflare when they'd come so very close to grabbing her. Larone kept on going over the events at Corsin, kicking himself for stupid mistakes, like not just going onto the hoverbus and *dragging* the woman off, even if it caused a huge scene.

But it could have been worse. After watching that hauler soar away into Corsin's clear blue sky, and after making sure Marcross and Grave would be okay, LaRone had gone to the port's central office and, after some barely-veiled threats, learned that the big hauler that had blasted out of the port without authorization was called *Trivigaunte*. It was registered as belonging to Phelox Shipping Incorporated and was carrying a full shipment of industrial-size agro-droids and farming equipment up the Hydian to the Corporate Sector.

It was a safe bet that *Trivigaunte* had busted out of Corsin because it didn't want to be late on its shipment, even though planetary flight control was blocking all ships from the direction of contested Bandomeer. With that in mind, LaRone had gathered up his men and, after refusing local medical treatment for Marcross and Grave, got them back aboard *Hand of Judgment*, and launched. Flight control had tried to stop them, but they against a well-armed Mandalorian pursuit ship, they hadn't tried very hard.

LaRone had no idea how fast that hauler could go through hyperspace, but he bet their ship could catch up with it by the time they reached the Corporate Sector. The real question was what to do when they got there.

"We're going to have to trust Brightwater on this," Grave was saying as he and LaRone walked down the long corridor leading to Marcross's cabin. He hadn't been knocked around

as badly as Marcross, but small bandage-strips marked his face with white streaks and the blast had blown out his left eardrum. There were replacements for that sort of thing on *Grey Wolf*, but even their well-stocked Mandalorian ship didn't have any aboard.

"He's on his own, with Starflare to keep in line."

"He's a scout trooper. He knows how to operate solo. And I bet that hauler has only a handful of crewmen. Not a one of them's going to be as good with a blaster as Brightwater."

"I just hope it doesn't come to that."

"He memorized our comm freq. If he can drop us a line, he will."

They stepped into the doorway and looked into Marcross's cabin. They each had their own rooms on those ship, but LaRone was pretty sure those rooms had initially been designed as prison cells, because they barely had room to squeeze in two people, let alone four. Marcross was on his back with his head on one pillow and his encased leg propped up by two more. He was awake, though, and talking to Quiller, who sat on a chair next to his bed.

"How's our patient?" asked Grave with a forced smile.

"Enjoying the amenities, right?" Quiller patted him on the knee.

"The bed's too stiff and the maid's too ugly. Next time I'm checking into another hotel." Marcross grunted. At least he was trying jokes.

"Nothing from Brightwater yet?" asked Quiller. LaRone shook his head.

"We just have to wait," Grave insisted. "He won't leave us dangling."

"Did you send an update to Thrawn?" asked Marcross.

LaRone nodded. "I told him everything. I assume he forwarded the edited version to Isard."

"I'm sure she'll be happy," Quiller muttered.

"I don't care what Isard thinks." Grave crossed his arms over his chest. "We're doing this for Thrawn, not her, remember?"

"Yeah, I know,"

It was a weird place to be, serving the Empire again, but not really. LaRone wasn't even sure if what Isard had even

counted as the Empire, any more than what Kaine, Zsinj, or the others did. He also wasn't sure if it mattered. It sounded like Isard's Empire was just replicating all the worst parts of the old one. When they'd heard Palpatine and Vader were dead, LaRone had been surprised how little it had affected any of them. They'd given themselves over to Thrawn and life in the Unknown Regions more thoroughly than any of them had anticipated.

"So, what happens now?" asked Marcross. "We wait on Brightwater to come through?"

"That sounds like our best bet, unfortunately."

"Fine by me," he sighed from his bed. "I don't have anywhere else to be."

Irrational as it was, Syal was actually starting to feel *better*, now that she'd been captured. She still had no idea what this man's mission was or who he worked for- she didn't even know his *name*- but she'd exchanged more words with him than everyone else combined since fleeing Coruscant. And for right now, at least, they both wanted the same thing: to get out of this frozen warehouse and someplace warm.

When they did get to the exit, they didn't open it right away. Her captor made her stand to the side and pried the casing off the access panel with a dormant vibro-blade. After that he'd done something with the wiring she couldn't understand, but her guess was that he wanted to make sure the door opened without setting off alarms on the bridge.

When the door slid open, she stepped inside without even bothering to check the corridor. It was empty, thankfully, and even more thankfully, the air was comfortably warm. Her captor stepped in after her and the door shut behind them.

"Well, that's an improvement," he said as he scanned the hallway with one hand on his holstered pistol.

There were no security cameras in sight, so he stepped forward and waved her to follow. He had to have been aware that he was leaving his back exposed as he scouted ahead; he probably assumed she wasn't strong enough to hurt him and had no place to run anyway. He was right enough in that, so Syal crept close behind.

"From those schematics, it looked like there's an auxiliary comm console close by," he said. "We should be able to patch into their main systems from there."

"And then you call your friends?"

"That's right."

She didn't know what she'd do once they came; maybe she'd try to surrender herself to *Trivigaunte's* crew beforehand. Maybe she could claim this man kidnapped her; it was close enough to the truth.

They had to hotwire two more doors before they reached the cramped chamber with the comm console. Once the door was closed behind them he crouched down and opened up maintenance hatch on the console's underside. He dropped onto his back and began fiddling with the wiring again.

"What is it?" Syal asked as she awkwardly crouched beside him. "What are you doing?"

"Same thing I was doing with the door- making sure they don't know we're here. And they're gonna pay more attention to outbound comm signals than doors sliding open and- Ah! That should work."

She shuffled out of the way so he could crawl out from under the console and get upright. As he popped to his feet she asked, "How do you know how to do all this? What were you, a stormtrooper?"

He looked at her, surprised. "Why do you say that?"

"When I first saw your people on Corsin... I thought you carried yourself like stormtroopers."

"Well. Imagine that."

He turned away from her and flipped on the console. As the two-dimensional screen lit up, she pressed, "Is that what you are? A stormtrooper?"

"A scout trooper, actually. And it's probably better to say *was*."

"Then what are you now? A mercenary?"

"I already said I'm not a merc. What I am now... is complicated." He started typing something into the console's control panel, probably an encryption code. "Tell the truth, I don't understand what my boss is after more often than not, but I've learned to trust his judgment... There we go."

"What is it?" She craned her neck to look over his shoulder. The screen came alive with static.

"Oh, come on, go through..." The man bit his lip. He punched a button and electric white noise emanated from the console speakers.

Syal strained her ears. She thought she heard some voices through the blur, but it was hard to tell. Then, without warning, the static resolved into the image of a face. She wasn't sure, but it might have been one of the men from Corsin.

"Quiller, is that you?" the man said as he leaned close to the screen. "Can you hear me?"

The lips on the screen moved soundlessly. The man next to Syal shook his head and tapped his ear. The one on the screen reached out to punch a button, then sounded clearly over the comm: "Fierfek, it's about time!"

"Sorry, had a little trouble hacking into this thing's comm system. Is LaRone with you?"

"You bet. Gimme a sec." The man disappeared from the screen, but Syal faintly heard him shout, "Boss! Get your butt up here!"

The man standing beside her grinned as a second face appeared onscreen. "Hey, LaRone, happy to see me?"

"You bet," the other one smiled as the first man, Quiller, shouldered in next to him.

"How are Grave and Marcross? Are they?"

"Battered but okay. Do you have the package?"

"Right here. Good condition too." He took Syal by the shoulder and pulled her into view. "Hey, Quiller, say hello to your girlfriend."

"Shut up! She's not-"

"We're riding Rimward on the Hydian now," LaRone interrupted. "We'll try to intercept you when you get to the Corporate Sector. Any idea where your first stop will be?"

"I checked the ship's logs. Looks like we'll drop off at Orron III first. It's an agro-world. I think this ship's loaded with industrial-grade farm equipment."

"I know. I got all this info from Corsin flight control. You're on the Damorian BFF-3 hauler *Trivigaunte* by the way, owned by Phelox Shipping Incorporated."

"Good man."

"Are you *sure* your first stop is Orron III? If it is, we'll meet you there for an extraction. This ship is fast, so we'll probably get there first, even with the delay."

"Sure as can be. Meet us there. We'll find someplace to hide away until we get there."

"Good. Is the ship you're on armed?"

"I checked the schematics. Looks like just basic shields and a couple defensive cannons. Nothing yours can't handle."

"Good to know. Take the package someplace quiet and hide out for the duration. When you drop out of lightspeed, see if you can get back to this console. We'll call you and tell you what to do."

"Great. Shouldn't hog the comm any longer. Anything else?"

"I think that's it for now."

"Okay. See you boys soon. Tell Grave and Marcross I said hi."

With a flip of a switch, he turned off the comm and dropped back to the deck. He scooted under the console and looked over the wiring.

"What is it?" Syal asked, still standing.

"Just making sure I didn't do anything too obvious. We might have to camp out for a while, maybe even a day or two. I don't want somebody to use this console and find it's been tampered with."

"Good idea." As he rose to his feet their eyes met briefly. That jarred her. She hadn't looked him in the eyes before, not directly. It had been strange, listened to him talk on the comm. He carried himself like a stormtrooper but he didn't sound like one. He hadn't been talking to simple soldiers or mercenaries on the comm, he'd been talking with *friends*, people he cared about, who were relieved to see he was okay. She didn't now how to feel about that.

As he started work on the door again she asked, "What's your name?"

He glanced over his shoulder and met her eyes again. "Korlo Brightwater."

"Okay." She paused, then added, "I'm Syal Antilles Fel."

His eyes narrowed in thought. Then he turned back to the door panel and started working again. "I like your stage name better. No offense."

"None taken."

"You choose that yourself or was it a manager or something?"

"It was mine."

"Well, I'm sure there's a good story behind it but you can tell me later." He reached down and pressed the button to open the door. "Come on, let's go."

With a hiss, the corridor appeared before them. Two beings, walking down the hall toward them, froze in mid-stride and whipped their blaster-pistols up.

"Stop!" the one in front, a blue-skinned humanoid, said. "Hands on your heads! Now!"

Syal froze. She glanced at Brightwater, whose face was twisted in a grimace.

"Hands up! *Now!*"

"Oh, *nuts*," Brightwater sighed and put his hands on his head. Syal followed his lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY **HOME ONE**

In all his years with the New Republic, and the Rebel Alliance before that, Wedge Antilles had never raised his voice in anger against a superior office. But this time, it was all he could do to keep from screaming.

"You should have told us. We had every right to know. We *needed* to know," Wedge insisted as he leaned over Cracken's desk, hands balled into fists and planted on the desktop. Cracken and Ackbar watched him stonily from the other side while Fel paced frantically behind his back.

"If we'd told you, what would you have done?" asked Cracken. "Grabbed an X-wing and flown to Coruscant yourself?"

It took Wedge a second to realize he wasn't being facetious. He glanced over his shoulder at Fel; the baron had stopped pacing and fixed the intelligence director with a dark scowl.

"I trusted you to recover my wife," Fel said. "That was my condition for flying for you in the first place."

"We're still working to recover her. Just because the first extraction team failed—"

"They were *killed*," Fel hissed.

Cracken nodded. "And so was Isard's team. My men protected Syal with their lives and I have more people ready to do the same."

"Tell me, when your *first* team went silent, what did you do? Did you send another team? Or did you just sit outside and *let* Isard's people comb the site?"

"My operatives in Imperial City are very... limited right now. When she took power Isard's purge of suspected intel operatives was frighteningly thorough."

"So you're saying we're blind on Coruscant. Did you even know Isard hadn't grabbed her until we got the intel from Boudolayz?"

Cracken's eyes narrowed. Fel hadn't told the general how he'd gotten the Ubiquitorate files related to his wife; he hadn't told Wedge either and frankly Wedge didn't want to know, because however he'd gotten it, it hadn't been above board.

Carefully, the general said, "There's no indication she has been captured."

"But you haven't found her. You don't even have a *clue*."

Cracken remained silent and stone-faced.

"For all we know, Isard could have grabbed her a couple days later," Wedge said through gritted teeth. "This intel from Boudolayz, it's already almost two weeks old. We have no idea if she's on Coruscant, or if Isard grabbed her, or if she ran all the way to the Rim by now."

"At least tell me you have a plan," Fel growled. "Tell me you haven't just been sitting here doing *nothing* for a week while you send us off to fight Makati."

"We've been putting together a plan. But it's been delayed, *slightly*, by difficulty in procurement."

"Procuring *what*?"

Ackbar cleared his throat and spoke for the first time. "All of General Cracken's agents carry a special, unmarked identicard with them that emits a special isotope that can be used for tracking. Unless the exact isotope is known it is impossible to identify."

"It's a technique we borrowed from ISB," Cracken said.

"Because our resources on Coruscant are limited," Ackbar continued, "We haven't been able to thoroughly search Imperial City for this marker."

"And you think Syal has it with her?" Wedge frowned.

"The report recovered from Boudolayz was very thorough," Cracken said. "The Imperials listed everything they recovered from my agents. The identicard wasn't there."

"So Syal took it when she ran," Fel said impatiently, "But there's no way of knowing she's even *on* Coruscant."

"No, but our tracker is modified so that each isotope has a longer half-life than what the Imperials use. With the proper techniques and equipment, we can track the movements of that identicard all across Imperial City for the past month. So if she ran to a spaceport, for example, we can find that out and trace her from there."

Ackbar said, "We've been putting together a modified TIE fighter than can track these isotopes while flying in the upper atmosphere over Imperial City. This aerial scan will be by far the most efficient way to track the target's movement."

"Assuming the *target* still has the identicard," Fel said.

Ackbar held his webbed hands open, as if to say, *It's all we have to go on.*

"So that's it?" Wedge said "That's all you can do? Send a TIE to fly around Coruscant and *hope* it finds a trace of Syal?"

"If that fails, there *are* other options..."

"*Other options*," Fel repeated bitterly. He leaned over the table and glared at Cracken. "I trusted you people to find my wife. Instead you fail, she slips through your fingers, and you don't even have the decency to tell me the truth."

"Giving you this information right before Bandomeer would have only distracted you," Ackbar said, but it sounded as weak to Fel as it did to Wedge.

"If I'd have known this, I wouldn't have flown for you at Bandomeer," Fel sneered. "And I'm not flying for you again."

He spun around and stalked out of the office. Wedge watched him go, then looked back at Ackbar and Cracken. In another situation he would have uttered some amends to these commanding officers- being he'd known and trusted for years- then chased after Fel until he convinced him to change his mind.

Instead, without a word, Wedge turned and left the room.

The Provisional Council was due to meet in one hour, but Leia wanted to see Mon Mothma first. The woman was as accommodating as ever, and met Leia in her personal quarters deep within *Home One's* most secure section. Like everything else about Mon Mothma, the cabin had a simple

understated elegance; its pale walls were adorned only with a few precious items gathered during the woman's long life: a shimmersteel crest bearing the seal of the Old Republic given to all newcoming senators, a bouquet of hand-picked flowers from Chandrila, a faintly glowing Mon Calamari watersphere. Leia been here before, and every time she saw the two-dimensional, oil-painted portrait of Bail Organa hanging on the bulkhead across from the entrance, she felt a tightness in her chest.

Mon Mothma, though, bade her to sit down across from her at the humble kitchen table. Leia wanted to take out her data-pad and start showing all the notes she'd taken over the past evening as she discussed, again and again, the planned negotiations with Borsk Fey'lya and later with Winter. But she knew she'd get to lay all those out at the Council meeting. Right now, she had to speak from the heart.

"Well, Leia?" she asked, hands folded in her lap. "Have you come for one last-ditch effort to convince me to stop negotiations?"

Leia wasn't entirely sure why she was here. She'd just felt she had to talk to this woman: her mentor, her father's friend. She said, "I've spent the past day talking this over with Fey'lya. I'm still not convinced it's the right thing to do."

"But you're no longer convinced it's the wrong one?"

The woman was as perceptive as ever. Leia allowed a slight smile. "I guess not. I can see advantages to negotiating with the CSA. I know we could use their resources, and if our intervention really *can* help liberalize it, then we'd be doing good for billions of beings."

"But you still have doubts."

"Of course I do. I've never been to the Corporate Sector but I've heard enough about it, especially from Han. They might have some good people working for them but they won't reform easily. The CSA doesn't care about principles, only profit. But then, it could be argued that even if the CSA *can't* be reformed, then it would still be better, morally, if their resources went to help *us* instead of the Empire."

"Yes, Borsk made that argument to me when he was starting his secret talks. I take it you don't find them convincing?"

Leia didn't speak, but her expression must have said it all. Mon Mothma laughed softly and said, "Leia, do you know why I keep Borsk Fey'lya as close as I do?"

Leia blinked. "I didn't mean to—"

"Of course you did. This isn't the Empire, Leia. You don't just have a right to question your leaders' judgment, you have a *duty*. And I'm sure you've wondered. I know Admiral Ackbar has, even if he's too much of a good soldier to make a fuss."

"Then why?"

"Borsk is a patriot, just like you, even if he shows it differently. He wants the New Republic to succeed and he's willing to use whatever political tools he has to ensure it does. I find his honesty refreshing."

"Honesty.... That's not a word I usually associate with Fey'lya."

"He's quite honest, in his way, as honest as Ackbar. It's why they're constantly butting heads."

"The way he plays politics isn't the way my father did. Or you."

"No." She glanced across the room at Bail Organa's portrait. Some distant memory made her expression soften. "Leia, I remember one of the worst arguments I ever had with your father. The Alliance was still in its infancy, and when we were trying to put together a fighting force, we asked ourselves question: What should we do with former Separatists? The Clone Wars weren't long over then, and there were still a lot of hold-outs who were fighting the Empire just as they'd fought the Republic. Were they allies or not? I had so many debates about it with Bail and Garm..."

Her expression softened again. After an acrimonious split, Garm Bel Iblis, another Old Republic senator turned Rebel like Mon Mothma and her father, had taken a small band of followers to fight a solo war with the Empire. Leia had hoped that Palpatine's death would bring him back into the fold, but she'd heard nothing on his fate. She frankly assumed he was dead.

"Garm wanted to take any fighting help, assuming they hadn't committed war crimes. Bail was furious about that.

He thought we should only work with people who also wanted to reestablish the Republic.”

“Practicality versus principles,” Leia said. That sounded like Garm and Bail.

“I was worried about perception, Leia. Welcoming former Separatists might discredit our movement to potential supporters and justify Imperial propaganda. But we *did* need help. So in the end I forced a compromise. Only Separatist leaders who denounced their former positions and declared support for a New Republic would help us.” A wry smile touched her face. “Though on Garm’s insistence, we did lend a helping hand to some others. Just to give Palpatine extra trouble.”

“So that’s what you’re saying I should do, then? Try to make a compromise out of all this?”

“Leia, out of everyone on the Council, I can think of no one more fit to do it than you.”

Leia knew it was a compliment, but the thought of all that responsibility was terrifying. She swallowed and said, “Then I guess I should get ready to go with Fey’lya to the Corporate Sector, shouldn’t I?”

Mon Mothma smiled, reached out, and placed a hand on Leia’s. “I think that would be best.”

Leia snorted, shook her head. “Shame you sent Han off to Kashyyyk with Lando and Chewie. I could use some tips about his old stomping ground.”

“Even without it, Leia, I think you’ll be just fine.”

“The Corporate Sector,” Dey’rylan said as he stared across Admiral Drayson’s desk.

“Word just came down from the Provo Council. They voted and made it official. They’re sending Councilors Fey’lya and Organa. Plus a small team of diplomatic aides.”

“The Corporate Sector,” he repeated.

“Would you prefer they go somewhere else?”

“The Corporate Sector.”

“I’m sorry, Reyan, but did your brain just freeze?”

“You know what this means as well as I do,” Dey’rylan scowled. “They just gave us a great opportunity.”

Admiral Drayson put his hands behind his head and tipped his chair back. "An opportunity for what, pray tell?"

"Don't play coy, Admiral. The Corporate Sector is Makati's stomping ground. He was the official Imperial Advisor there for two years."

"True enough, but what do you expect that to get you?"

"There's only one way to find out." He leaned in over Drayson's desk. "You have to send me or Kasck, maybe both. We can be late additions to Fey'lya's diplomatic staff. Or have you already picked someone to send?"

"Not me, but Councilor Organa's aide Winter already works for Cracken. I'm sure she'll tag along."

"NRI isn't in charge of hunting grand admirals. *We* are." Dey'rylan stabbed a claw at his chest. "Send me, at least. Where are they meeting, anyway?"

"Etti IV, I believe. Apparently at the personal estate of a sympathetic Viceprex."

Dey'rylan was disappointed they weren't meeting at Bonadan, the Corporate Sector's most populous world, and the one where Makati had been based out of. Still, he pressed, "You can send separate teams. Send me with Fey'lya. Karr and Torr can go to Bonadan, humans fit in everywhere. Kasck and Ekrhine wouldn't stand out much either, not on a planet like that."

Drayson drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "What exactly do you think you can get on Makati that we haven't gotten already?"

Dey'rylan took a deep breath and wondered how far he should go. The moment Drayson had told him the news, the possibility had been in the back of his mind, trying to wiggle its way to the front.

"Well? What's *really* worth sending all of you to the Corporate Sector for?"

Dey'rylan took a breath and locked his eyes on Drayson's. "If Isard thinks there's trouble in the Corporate Sector, she'll send Makati."

He didn't say the rest of it. Drayson wanted him to. The admiral raised a black eyebrow.

"If she sends Makati, he might come with a fleet, but he'll still want to see things on the ground. Probably talk with the

Prex or the new Imp Advisor, see if he can't find some solution that doesn't involve vaping all Bonadan."

"Bonadan?"

"Yes, Bonadan," Dey'rylan hissed. He was all in it now. "It won't be hard. You can leak info to Isard, make it look authentic. She'll get wind that a couple New Republic Councilors- we can even say Fey'lya and Organa- are meeting with CSA officials on Bonadan in secret talks. And then she'll send Makati to sort things out."

"With or without a massive fleet?" Drayson said sarcastically.

"It doesn't matter," Dey'rylan waved a paw. "The point is, we can feed her fake intel, but it'll be real enough for her to take the bait. And when Makati comes to Bonadan, we can get him there."

"You mean assassinate?"

"I mean assassinate." It felt good, being able to say that word aloud.

"You know Bonadan doesn't allow weapons. They have gun-detectors everywhere."

"I know. But there's other ways. Jekk's great with explosives and Kasck can hit a flitgnat with one of his throwing needles from across the room. Sir, we can do this."

Drayson watched his carefully but didn't speak. They both knew this conversation bordered on treason. No, they wouldn't *actually* be telling the Imps where Fey'lya and Organa would be, but they'd certainly be pointing them in the right direction. If this were anyone but Drayson, Dey'rylan wouldn't have dared suggest it.

After a while, the admiral said, "What happens if you can't get him on Bonadan? What if he really *does* decide to stay on *Steadfast* and pound the planet from orbit?"

"He won't. He's not the indiscriminate slaughter type. He's got lots of old allies on Bonadan from his time as Imp Advisor there and he'll want to talk to them."

"What if he brings a whole fleet with him, and *then* somehow finds out about the meeting on Etti IV?"

Only an idiot didn't plan for worst-case scenarios, especially when going against grand admirals. Dey'rylan said, "We watch Makati carefully. We'll have a fleet stand-

ing by to evac the councilors. He won't pound Etti IV either. Fey'lya and Organa are too valuable. He'll want them alive if he can."

"That can get messy. We tried to extract Pestage on Ciutric and it was a nightmare."

"We were caught by surprise then. We won't this time. We'll keep a bunch of ships on standby and be prepared."

"And you think I can just get a whole rescue fleet to wait for something that *might* happen for reasons I can't explain? Because you know Ackbar's never going to approve of this."

"Sir, without risk-

"I know. But Ackbar won't go for it, I promise. He's given us approval to go after Makati, but using the councilors as bait will cross a line."

"Then another admiral. Burke. Convince Burke and *he* can come up with a way to spin it for Ackbar."

"Why Burke?"

"Because he's a feisty battle-dragon. He'll want another shot at Makati. And because he's not afraid to break some limits to make sure things get done."

"Maybe. Or he could bring the whole plan to Ackbar."

"He won't do that, sir. Not unless he thinks we'll do it without him, which we won't."

Drayson leaned back in his chair. His scowl relaxed into something like a wry smile.

"What?" Dey'rylan frowned. "What's so funny?"

"I wanted to hear how convincing you could be."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'll set up a talk with Burke, in this office. And you're going to be here too, Reyan. Then we'll see how you'll do against someone who doesn't already have the same idea as you."

According to *Home One's* shipboard chronos it was 2330 hours, at the very end of the evening, and the ship's recreation center was shut down, its rooms dark and empty. Wedge Antilles, however, had enough authority to argue his way past security, which was why he and Soontir Fel both had spent the past fifteen minutes pounding, punching, and kicking their anger away.

Wedge seemed to have gotten most of it out of him, but Fel was still raging. When his knuckles were staring to hurt, even through the padded gloves, he started beating the punching bag with a mix of forward kicks and snapping elbows.

It was only when he tried a roundhouse kick that he threw himself off-balance. He fell against the dangling, swaying punching bag and hugged his arms around it for stead. He suddenly realized how breathless and exhausted he was, and he lowered himself to the deck. Wedge was sitting on a bench two meters away, guzzling water. In the low ambient light his face gleamed with sweat.

When he'd satisfied his thirst, Wedge rolled his water-bottle across the floor to Fel. The other man took it and drank. They'd barely said anything to each other since stalking out of Cracken's office hours ago.

Finally, when Fel screwed the cap back on the bottle and placed it beside him, Wedge asked, "What are you going to do?"

Such a vague, open question. It could have meant anything. Fel stared at him for a while before he said, "What are *you* going to do?"

Wedge didn't answer either. He looked down at his shoes and said, "Cracken and Ackbar, they're not trying to be unfair. They're trying to do the best they can."

"It's not good enough. And they should have told us both."

"What would you have done? If you'd known, before Bandomeer?"

Fel scowled. He didn't have a good answer for that, or for anything else. He looked back on everything he'd done since Brentaal and he didn't know what things he could have done to make things turn out different. He only knew that what he had done wasn't enough. It might have even cost Syal her life.

"Tell me," Wedge said, with a touch of pleading, "Do you think Syal could... I don't know, make it? With all those ISB agents after her, right on her tail, could she... handle it?"

"Your sister was always resourceful. She ran away from Corellia when she was a teenager and started a new life, all by herself."

"I know that. I just..." Wedge paused, hesitated, then said, "What is my sister *like*?"

The pain in his voice, the desperation, made Fel looked away. In the past six months, Wedge had never asked that simple question. He'd probably been ashamed to.

Fel thought a moment, then said, "In a life like mine- like *ours*- there isn't much room for simple pleasures. We're always behind shipped from one spaceship to another, always getting into a fighter cockpit never knowing if we'll make it out alive. My parents on Corellia are farmers. This isn't the life they imagined for me. This isn't the life I ever thought I'd have."

"I know," Wedge said softly. "My parents ran a fuel station."

But Wedge's parents were dead, and Fel's were still alive, not that he ever expected to see them again. Still, it made a difference. He continued, "Even when we're not fighting, or getting ready to fight, everything is still about the war. We have to meet admirals and politicians and talk about the fate of the galaxy and the best relief we can hope for is a couple hours' drinking with other pilots who will probably be dead in a month."

He paused and thought of Rone Tearling. Then he said, "When I was with your sister, I never thought about *any* of that."

Wedge raised his head. "Is she what you thought you'd have, growing up?"

"I never thought I'd marry a holo-star. Even as a boy, I never dreamed it. Farmer's children have to be... practical." Fel smiled softly. "But a warm face, a home to come back to. A place that has nothing to do with his war. Of course that's what I wanted. Didn't you?"

Wedge looked down again. His hands tightened, clasped his knees. He gave a very, very long sigh. Finally, when he picked his head up again, his face was hard with determination.

"I'm going to go see Cracken in the morning," Wedge said. "I'll be the one to fly that TIE fighter over Coruscant. Whatever happened to her, I'll find out. I promise."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RUUSAN

According to all the data-files Dagon Niriz had read on the trip outbound from Improcco, the planet that lay ahead of them was a forgotten dustball that hosted only a few thousand human settlers, plus some primitive non-human indigenous sentients. It was of no major trade routes and held no strategic value. Niriz was still enough of a traditional soldier to find it fundamentally incredible that High Inquisitor Jerec's mighty flagship was sitting in orbit above such a worthless world with its handful of support craft. Funded by Ardur Kaine and built over Kuat in the years after the Battle of Yavin, *Vengeance* was as mighty a warship as Niiz had ever seen: as long as an *Executor*-class super star destroyer, though its narrower hull brought it down to a mere three-fifths of the mass of Darth Vader's flagship, and heavy automation reduced its crew requirement by half.

It was often said that Jerec viewed Vader as his key rival for Palpatine's attention, and Niriz had to wonder whether his long black sword sitting over Ruusan had been Jerec's way of compensating for Vader's long gray dagger.

Well, if it had been built to intimidate, it was certainly working.

Niriz took a deep breath and stepped away from *Grey Wolf's* viewport. He stalked over to the communications station, where Grand Admiral Thrawn waited patiently, hands clasped behind his back.

"They haven't hailed us yet, sirs," the comm lieutenant said.

"Then it's up to us to initiate." Thrawn nodded at Niriz. "If you'd begin, please."

"Very well." Niriz stepped up behind the lieutenant. "Hail them. Tell them we have a message for the ship's captain. It's very urgent."

"Yes, sir."

As the lieutenant sent the signal, Niriz tried very hard to hide his tension. Even before Palpatine's death, Jerec had been arrogantly independent in his operations. Since Endor he'd apparently dropped all pretense of loyalty to anyone but himself, despite being funded by the Pentastar Alignment. There was no guarantee he wouldn't simply fire on *Grey Wolf* without explanation.

The lieutenant announced, "Incoming message, sir," and Niriz let himself breathe.

The blue holo-image that appeared before him was a bald human male with a trim dark beard around his jaw. He wore a captain's uniform and introduced himself as Vehn Sysco, commanding officer of *Vengeance*.

"Thank you for your prompt response," Niriz said, acutely aware that Thrawn was standing just a meter away, right outside the edge of the holo-field. "We have urgent business with High Inquisitor Jerec. Please connect us to him directly, authorization code Alpha-niner-seventeen-ex-see-four."

Sysco frowned thoughtfully, then said, "One moment, please."

The holo shrunk off. Niriz had no idea what the authorization code meant, let alone whether Jerec would care. He glanced sideways at the grand admiral but, as usual, the admiral was showing nothing.

A moment later the lieutenant said, "New signal, sirs. Audio only. Tight-beamed and highly encrypted."

"If you'll allow me," Thrawn said, and stepped over to the speaker grill. "Open the link, please."

There was the click of an audio transmission starting, and then Thrawn said, "Greetings, Inquisitor Jerec. It has been a long time."

"Grand Admiral Thrawn," said a crisp, aristocratic voice. "I had no idea you'd returned."

"It's a fact I still wish to keep secret. However, I have business I'd like to speak with you about face-to-face."

"I don't have time for your games, Thrawn. What's happening down at Ruusan?"

"Please," Thrawn interrupted, calmly. "It will only take a few minutes."

After a tiny pause, Jerec said, "Very well. I will ready a place for you at the foremost hangar bay. We can speak there once your shuttle arrives."

"And what makes you think I would willingly leave my ship?"

"Do you think you'd be surrendering an advantage, Admiral? You *have* no advantage."

"Surely you aren't afraid to leave your own ship."

"Hardly. I'm merely wounded by your apparent lack of trust in me."

"Trust is given when it is earned."

"Have I done something to you, Admiral? Do you feel betrayed, personally?"

Thrawn met his taunt with a level tone. "I merely wish to guarantee my own safety. That is why I've kept my star destroyer outside of your firing range."

"Are you afraid I'll shoot you down on approach? Very well, Admiral. I will order all my guns to go dormant. I'll pull all of my fighter patrols back to base. This will take a few minutes, but your scanners will clearly show that I mean you no harm."

"I appreciate your show of good faith. If your weapons are dormant in five minutes, I will send a shuttle to your forward hangar." He paused, then added, "I will also be bringing a squadron of stormtroopers bodyguards, and two Noghri."

After a pregnant silence, Jerec replied, "Very well."

"How many Noghri do *you* have aboard your ship, Inquisitor?"

"Six."

"Then I looked forward to seeing all six of them with you at the hangar."

Jerec chuckled, like he'd said something funny. "I must compliment you on your bravery, Admiral. I look forward to seeing you shortly."

The comm clicked off. Thrawn stepped back from the console and paced toward the tactical console. Falling in at his side, Niriz said, "Admiral, are you sure this is a good idea? Those six Noghri—"

"Will kill me if they think I'm deceiving them," Thrawn nodded. "However, Ekhrikhor and Akharan will take care of that on their own if they decide to. The important thing is for you to be ready here, Captain."

"I will be." As they stepped up to the tactical console he asked an ensign, "Are all TIEs in position?"

"Yes, sir," she nodded. "All ships confirmed their designated locations by echo-bursts three minutes ago."

Niriz glanced at the tactical holo ahead of them: one small blue wedge marking *Grey Wolf*, a long red sword marking *Vengeance*, and that was all. Even Jerec's starfighter patrols were returning to base, as promised.

"Are his weapons going cold too?" he asked. The ensign nodded again.

"Ekhrikhor and Akharan should be at the shuttle," Thrawn said. "I shouldn't keep them waiting. Captain Niriz, the bridge is yours."

The grand admiral started for the exit. After a second's hesitation, Niriz followed him through the open blast doors and down the corridor.

"You have a question, Captain?"

"Sir... This is a very complicated plan, with many uncertain variables."

"You don't like it."

"It's a terrible risk, sir, especially for you."

"Without risk there can be no reward."

"I know. Sir..." Niriz stopped in front of the lift. "Sir, if you *are* killed by Jerec, what should I do?"

"You should take *Grey Wolf* and flee the system. Do not even think of taking this ship within range of *Vengeance's* cannons, because you cannot win that battle. If there is an emergency, try to recover the cloaked fighters, then run."

"Run to where?"

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "Wherever you wish, I suppose. I won't be in a position to stop you."

"Sir... Should I go to Nirauan, join Parck?"

"Is that what you'd like to do?"

It was. This whole time since they'd returned to Imperial space he'd felt the gnawing need to back to the Unknown Regions. That strange place had become home.

"Yes, sir. I don't know how we'll ever manage against Nuso Esva without you, sir, but I feel I'd have to try."

"I'm glad," Thrawn smiled faintly as the lift doors swung open behind him. "But don't be so maudlin, Captain. I'm not dead yet. In fact, I believe what we do today will be a long step toward securing our victory over the Rebellion."

"You think the Noghri are that valuable?"

"I do. Goodbye, Captain."

Niriz snapped a salute. Thrawn nodded once again, then stepped through the door, and the lift sped him away.

In all his life, Akharan of Clan Bakh'tor had never truly believed he'd set foot among the stars. He knew others who had, including Ekhrikhor who stood beside him now in the cargo hold of the shuttle. Akharan tried to imitate the poise of the older Noghri, so that the white-shelled stormtroopers who also filled the hold would not think him afraid. Others from Clan Bakh'tor had also been deemed worthy of going into the stars and serving Lord Darth Vader; many had not returned. Akharan didn't know if, deep down, he really wished to follow the path of those glorious, brave star-walkers. A part of him was afraid of dying, as a warrior should never be. He was ashamed of that part, but honest enough to admit to it.

The shuttle shuddered around them. Softly so the stormtroopers couldn't hear, Ekhrikhor breathed, "We are landing now. We should be on the New Vader's craft."

Akharan wondered if that choice of words was deliberate, *New Vader*. They'd both been in the audience at Nystao when the self-proclaimed New Vader, apparently called Jerec by other star-walkers, had demanded obedience from all the clans of Honoghr. Akharan, like all the rest, had felt bowed by the man's powers at the time, but doubt had gnawed at him later. When Thrawn had come to Nystao asserting himself as Lord Vader's rightful heir, Akharan's first instinct was to believe him. But Ekhirkhor was, appar-

ently, more skeptical, and Akharan tried to keep in mind that the other Noghri was older and wiser and had walked among the stars before.

The shuttle shook one more time and was still. Thrawn stepped out of the forward compartment and turned his glowing red gaze on the Noghri. To Akharan, that were just as intimidating at Lord Vader's obsidian mask or Jerec's eyeless glare.

"Ekhrikhor and Akharan of Clan Ekh'mir, are you prepared to witness?" he asked.

The two Noghri bowed their heads. Ekhrikhor said, "We are ready."

"Akharan, are your eyes open?"

He must have been referring to the slim glass that had been placed in his right eye before boarding the shuttle. He'd been told not to touch it or acknowledge it was there in any way. The thin lens still itched the inside of Akharan's eye, and he had no idea why it was there, but he'd been given the order to ignore it and he'd follow that order.

"I see everything clearly," he told the admiral.

"Good. Then let us see who is the *true* heir to the Empire."

He had to have known that if he did not prove himself as such his life, he'd be judged a liar and his life was forfeit. He showed no fear and never had, which was perhaps why Akharan was inclined to believe him. Thrawn made a gesture with his white-gloved hands and one of the stormtroopers pulled a metal bar on the wall. The floor started to groan as a ramp lowered to the ground on which the shuttle rested.

With Ekhrikhor on his left and Akharan on his right, Thrawn marched down the ramp and onto the deck. The six white-shelled troopers followed in a column behind them. The space they stepped into was vast and desolate: the gray walls were tall and smooth and utterly featureless, the ceiling so high Akharan had to keep his eyes from being drawn up to the high-above walkways. The only beings standing before them were six more Noghri, four troops in the same white shells, and the New Vader.

Thrawn and Jerec took a step toward each other. Thrawn held out one finger, signaling the Noghri to stay where they were. To Akharan they looked like a study in opposites:

Thrawn had his brilliant white uniform and glowing red gaze, Jerec his swirling black robes and eyes hidden by a strip of dark cloth. For a long moment, the two men just stared at one another. Akharan had seen warriors face off many times, silently sizing each other up in preparation for attack. He knew he was seeing that now.

"You know why I have come," said Thrawn. "I'm here to claim what is rightfully mine."

"You refer to these Noghri warriors?" Jerec spread his arms to indicate the three flanking him on either side. Akharan scanned their faces but recognized none from Clan Ekh'mir.

"I do. Lord Vader passed command of the Noghri Death Commandos to me after the Battle of Derra IV."

"I see. And can you prove this, Admiral?"

"He took me to Honoghr. I spoke with their clan leaders. There should be no question as to who commands their loyalty. You are a thief, Inquisitor."

Akharan tensed; instead of striking out in response to that insult, Jerec chuckled and placed one hand on a small silver cylinder attached to his belt. "You've always been bold, Thrawn. It's what I respect about you."

"I've come to claim what is rightfully mine. Are these all the Noghri in your service?"

"They are."

"There are none down on the planet?"

"The planet is not for them. Oh, they've proven useful enough. They are excellent assassins and excellent spies. It was through them that I tracked an old friend of mine to the planet Dorlo. Capturing Rahn was the first step to finding the lost Valley of the Jedi.

"But the planet is not for them. Ruusan is a world for Jedi. I've sent my acolytes down to the surface. They've been excavating the Valley and very soon they will uncover something that will change the fate of this galaxy." Jerec took a step closer. "I'm telling you this not as a warning, Thrawn, but as advice. I will unlock power that has been hidden for one thousand years and claim power Palpatine himself never dreamed of. After that, Isard will not stand in my way, or any

of the other warlords or grand admirals. If you submit now, I promise you a place at my side.”

Akharan felt a chill down his spine, but Thrawn calmly shook his head. “I did not join the Empire to serve what you’d create.”

Jerec snorted, suddenly contemptuous. “You are clever and brave, but your vision is small. A pity, I suppose, but unavoidable for minds too weak to touch the Force.”

“Perhaps you will prove me right someday. For the moment, I’ve come to get what you have taken from me. These Noghri I brought with me have come from Honoghr. They will bear witness and tell their people who is the true heir to Lord Vader’s legacy.”

“Then they have come a long way for nothing.”

“Perhaps so. I believe it is time to find out.”

The audio/visual transmitter placed over in the Noghri Akharan’s right eye was a tiny device, able only to relay the two-dimensional images it recorded to the shuttle five meters away, but the shuttle was fully capable of tight-streaming the transmission back to its base ship. The primitive alien doubtless had no idea what it was wearing, which was why Thrawn had elected to implant the transmitter on the Noghri instead of a stormtroopers. Even if Jerec searched its mind with the Force, he’d still have no idea that Niriz was watching the entire show from *Grey Wolf’s* bridge.

He’d never seen Inquisitor Jerec in person but most who had said he was to feared as much as Darth Vader, perhaps more. After seeing Captain Sysco on the holo, Niriz couldn’t help but wonder what the flagship of Jerec’s captain felt about his leader. He wondered if the man had chosen assignment under Jerec, knowing he was taking a risk in order to fulfill his career ambitions. They said the same of men who’d chosen to serve Vader. He wondered if Sysco could have possibly felt the loyalty for the Inquisitor that Niriz felt for his grand admiral.

From the Noghri’s transmitted viewpoint, he could see only see Thrawn from behind as he stood ramrod-straight, hands clasped behind his back. He could see all of Jerec, though: his ominous Vader-like robes, the lightsaber sitting

silent and potent at his belt, his eyeless face sneering in arrogance. The man exuded a lust for power, a desire to dominate probably fueled by his connection with the Force. Perhaps it really was as Thrawn had said: Jedi power was a gateway to madness.

He didn't understand anything about a Valley of the Jedi or magic power that would let Jerec control the universe; he didn't know if it was really possible or not. All he knew, deep in his gut, was that the Empire had to be saved from men like Jerec.

"These Noghri I brought with me have come from Honoghr," Thrawn was saying. "They will bear witness and tell their people who is the true heir to Lord Vader's legacy."

"Then they have come a long way for nothing."

"Perhaps so. I believe it is time to find out."

The fingers of Thrawn's right hand twitched behind his back. That was the signal Niriz had been waiting for. He called to the tactical station, "Stage one. Go."

That was all that needed to be said. Thrawn had obtained a complete technical report of Jerec's super star destroyer, presumably from the same source that had given him permission to borrow the TIE Phantom fighters and the stygium cloaking devices from the secret storehouse on Improcco's moon. According to the wary Ubiquotrate officer who'd handed them over to *Grey Wolf*, those twelve ships were the last of their kind in the universe, and once their cloaks ran out of stygium crystals as fuel, their stealth power would be useless.

Well, Niriz hoped it would be worth it.

Twenty-five standard minutes before *Grey Wolf* had exited hyperspace on top of *Vengeance*, twelve cloaked TIE Phantoms had decanted from hyperspace. By the time Thrawn had commed Jerec, all of them had taken pre-arranged positions at critical points around the giant black star destroyer's hull.

On his signal, the first TIE Phantom fired a round of quintuple-linked laser blasts at the destroyer's unshielded central engine section. Even from *Grey Wolf's* bridge, Niriz could see the burst of an explosion.

He watched the view from *Vengeance* shake as the ship's deck shuddered. Thrawn stood admirably straight and calm, but the smug grin on Jerec's face suddenly vanished.

"What have you done?" he asked. "You dare fire on this ship?"

"If you check with Captain Sysco, you'll find that *Grey Wolf* is still well outside your shooting range," said Thrawn as he flashed another hand signal.

"Stage two!" Niriz called to his crew.

Another TIE Phantom fired, and instantly vaporized the primary sensor emplacement located directly aft of the star destroyer's bridge.

Jerec smothered his shock and, trying to remain haughty in front of the Noghri, pulled his comlink from his robe. "Captain Sysco, report at once!"

The captain's reply was too tinny for Niriz to make out, but when Jerec lowered his comlink he gave Thrawn a ferocious grin. Niriz still couldn't tell if the Inquisitor could actually see or not, but if he couldn't, he was doing an excellent job of faking it.

"You're playing one of your tricks. I thought as much." He called to the six Noghri around him. "This man who claims to be heir to Lord Vader's power is a fraud! He claims my title as New Vader but he dares not fight me like a warrior! He schemes and tricks but will not fight!"

The view on Niriz's screen shifted, like Akharan had just tensed. Thrawn's back remained in sight, however, and Niriz saw him flash another hand signal.

"Stage three!" he called.

A pair of TIE Phantoms swooped across the destroyer's flank, unleashing a chain of laser blasts that tore up its largest bank of starboard turbolaser batteries.

Akharan's view shook against as the big star destroyer shuddered. Jerec was calling to his comlink, "Put all shields up! All shields!" To Thrawn he snarled. "You have your *tricks*, Admiral, but they're no match for the Force."

"Then demonstrate your skill," Thrawn said. "Please, show that you're half as strong as Vader was."

The scowl disappeared from Jerec's face. For a moment he seemed to relax into some meditative state. A tiny smile

flexed his tattooed lips Then he brought his comlink to his mouth again and said, "Captain Sysco, fire the secondary forward turbolasers, six o'clock."

It took Niriz a half-second to calculate which TIE Phantoms Jerec had located. He called, "Move Shadow Seven, now!"

"Yes, sir!" barked the ensign from tactical.

Vengeance unleashed a sweep of turbolaser fire. Niriz watched as green plasma blasts fanned out into empty space and gradually dissipated.

"Shadow Seven reports successful evasion, sir!" the ensign said.

"Very good," Niriz planted a hand on her shoulder, as much to steady himself as her. Somehow, Jerec must have used his Force powers to sense TIE Phantom pilots hiding around his ship. Niriz had to admit he was stunned; not even the most advanced sensors could breach a stygium cloak.

Maybe there was something real behind all this Jedi magic after all.

He was so shocked he barely noticed Thrawn sending another hand signal, but when he spotted it he called, "Stage five, go!"

Stage four had involved ripping up another weapons battery, but apparently Thrawn wanted to move the schedule ahead; Jerec's Force powers might have spooked him too. Another TIE Phantom, hiding so close to *Vengeance's* underside that it slipped beneath the ship's energy shields, fired off a round of blasts that soared into its main hangar bay.

The ship must have shook again, but before Jerec could respond, Thrawn flashed yet another hand signal.

Niriz gave the order, and they went right to Stage Seven. The same TIE Phantom had had blasted the aft sensor array swung around and blasted the bridge shield generators to oblivion.

"Give in, you bastard," Niriz muttered. "Just *give in*."

Akharan had no idea what was happening, and the only consolation was that, from their expressions, none of the other Noghri did either, not even Ekhrikhhor. Thrawn and Jerec seemed to be dueling with magic somewhere around this massive vessel, but to the Noghri all they could begin to

understand was what was happening inside this near-empty hangar bay.

"Captain!" Jerec was calling into the little speaking-cylinder he held in his hand. "Fire aft central battery, six o'clock! Forward starboard to eight!"

The voice that replied was faint, but Noghri had excellent hearing. This captain, Jerec's servant, replied, "Still no hits, sir."

Confidently, Thrawn said, "Your Force powers clearly will not save you. Perhaps *Vader's* could, but yours must be too weak."

Even Akharan realized Jerec was being mocked. The man in black said, "Enough of your tricks. I'll show you the *real* power of the Force, Admiral, and you'll have no play to counter that."

Jerec stretched out one black glove. Blue lightning arced from his fingertips, catching Thrawn in the chest. The admiral's stoic face and confident posture suddenly evaporated; he clutched at his uniform in pain as more blue lightning jumped from Jerec's hand. The six white-shelled troopers standing behind the Noghri raised their weapons to fire; the soldiers with Jerec got their guns up quicker, and Akharan had to duck as a hail of laserfire slashed the air above his head. Then he looked behind him, all six troopers had fallen.

Jerec made another gesture. Thrawn was lifted off his boots and hovered in the air, clasping his chest, legs kicking in pain as Jerec, grinning madly, continued to send arcs of savage lighting from his hands.

Akharan and the other Noghri stared, absolutely stunned. He'd heard that Lord Vader could summon such deadly magic but he'd never thought he'd see any in person. From their expressions, neither had any of the other Noghri.

The ship shuddered again, but Jerec ignored it. With a motion of the hand he let Thrawn fall hard to the deck. Akharan started and put one hand on the hilt of his knife, but he had no idea who to use it on. Nothing made sense.

Jerec pulled the large silver cylinder from his belt and held it out. A beam of humming red light, like they'd said Darth Vader had wielded, appeared from one end.

The man in black held out his hands and called to the Noghri, "Is this what you've come for? Is this what you wanted to see? *This* is the power of Lord Vader's heir!" He swung one black glove toward Thrawn, and another blast of lightning leaped from his fingertips.

"So *witness!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO **BONADAN**

Viceprex Lankar Dright, head of the legal division for the thirty thousand star systems of governed by the Corporate Sector Authority, only woke up when the alarm clock next to his ear started screaming. He shot bolt-upright in the middle of his bed and looked around until he found the clock right in front of him and slammed it into silence.

His head was aching- it *always* ached when he'd been using glitterstim right before bed- and it took him a moment to make sense of his surroundings. He took in the big, sprawling bed. He took in the broad curving windows to his right that let in a lovely view of sunlit clouds and, if he looked below, the less-than-lovely landscape of Bonadan drifting far beneath his pleasure yacht. He took in his own reflection in the broad gold-framed mirror on the opposite wall (another less-than-lovely sight) and, finally, the very-much-lovely sight of his Leova lying next to him in a tangle of cream-colored bedsheets. The girl's face was beatifically calm: smooth and pale and forty years younger than this own, framed by silky black hair. His heart stung at the thought of waking her from slumber.

Then he remembered the headache, and decided he really *really* needed one quick shot of glitterstim before he went to the meeting with the Prex in an hour.

He threw himself out of the bed and stumbled over to the adjacent refresher. He grabbed his shorts on the way, stuck both legs awkwardly through, then groped around the counter-top, trying to find the bag where he'd kept his spice.

He and Leova had both had a bit last night and he *knew* it had to be somewhere but he just couldn't *find* it. His elbow accidentally knocked over a mug; it fell to the floor nosily but didn't break.

He looked back into the bedroom and saw Leova waking up. The girl stretched her smooth limbs and rubbed her pretty violet eyes awake.

"Oh, oh, I'm sorry, dear," he called. "I'm just, uh... I'm just looking for something."

"Are you looking for the spice, Lankar?" she asked sleepily.

"Well, you know how it is. I just need a little bit. Big meeting with the Prex coming up, you now. I've got to go soon. I'm sorry I can't show you out, dear."

"Oh, a meeting?" Leovia pouted. She looked adorable when she pouted. "What kind? Some big official one?"

"Well, not really official, not exactly." Damn it, his hands were shaking. Where *was* that spice?

"Not official? Ooh, are you getting on the Prex's good side?" Leova kicked back the covered and rolled onto her stomach. She peered up at Dright, big violet eyes curious.

"Well, maybe."

"Maybe how?" she purred and wiggled that smooth white body of hers playfully. It was almost enough to take his mind off the spice. Almost.

"Well," he breathed, "You see, we've got to prep for the meeting, the big meeting we're going to be having with the Rebels..."

"Rebels?" Leova gasped.

"No, I'm sorry. Not rebels. Well, yes rebels. Well, no. The Republic, I mean. The Prex thinks we should start selling to the New Republic." He moved into the main bedroom. He must have left the spice somewhere in there.

"Oh, how mischievous," Leova giggled. "I didn't know you were so *daring*, Lankar."

"Well, it was Go'thal's idea." He was way too old to blush when a teenage girl complimented him, but he couldn't help himself. "He thinks the Republic is up-and-coming and Isard's on the way out. He may be right. But since I'm in charge of the legal department, well," he chuckled modestly. "I guess he thought I could help him lay a groundwork."

“Does the ExO know about this?”

“No, so you’ve got to keep this hush, Leova, okay?” He tapped a finger against his lips.

She pouted again, then asked, “Are you going to be meeting people from the Reb- the *Republic* yourself, Lankar?”

“Well, that’s what I’m going to talk to the Prex about. Time, place, you know.”

“Are you going to meet anyone famous? Like Mon Mothma or Princess Leia?”

“I’m not sure yet. The Prex has been doing- Ah!”

He spotted the vial of spice, rolled against the wall near the window. He lunged for it, picked it up, flipped off the lid, and popped a single capsule into his mouth.

It went down easily. His headache a quickly and his hands stopped shaking. He looked down at Leova, pretty innocent little Leova, and fought the urge to jump back into bed with her.

“I’ve got to get dressed now, dear. You can call a drone and get out yourself, all right?”

“You mean I can’t stay here? What about tonight?”

“I’ve got my see my wife tonight,” Dright said with a shudder. “But *tomorrow* I’ll comm you, okay?”

“All right, Lankar.” She rolled onto her back and stretched out all four limbs like a tooka cat ready to play. “I’ll be waiting.”

So would he, but right now he had important CSA business to get on with. The space had really cleared his senses, though. In just five minutes he’d put on his clothes, gathered his things, called downstairs to prep a jumper to the surface, and bade goodbye to Leova. He dashed out of the room, leaving the girl to play among the sheets of his sprawling bed.

Leonia Tavira waited for four full minutes after Lankar Dright left, just to make sure he wouldn’t come back. Then she popped out of the bed and went looking for her clothes.

They weren’t too hard to find, despite the mess the Viceprex kept his personal suite in. Unlike Lankar Dright she actually remembered how the night before had went. She wouldn’t have minded forgetting, frankly, but she wasn’t stupid enough to blast her brain with spice until she got

hopelessly addicted. Also unlike Dright. Since catching the Viceprex's attention, she'd gotten very good at slipping capsules of spice into the side of her mouth, pretending to swallow, and disposing of them later. Once the glitterstim took hold of him, she didn't even have to feign its effects on herself.

All in all, she couldn't really complain. She'd been the one to seek out Dright's attention- his fondness for young women was an open secret in the chattering Corporate Sector oligarchy- and she finally stood in a position to reap some real rewards.

Once she'd gathered her things and dressed in the plain modest clothes she'd arrived in, Tavira found the promised automated jumper waiting for her at the yacht's ventral docking station. Dright had thoughtfully arranged it so not a single sentient saw her when she came and went from his private airship, and the logs from her travel were erased and overwritten after every visit. It was a good way to keep her actions secret, both from Dright's wife and from anyone who might use his infidelities and blackmail material. The Viceprex was a fool in some ways, but clever in others.

Old Moff Tharil Tavira on Eiattu VI had been much the same, though once his wife had died he hadn't hesitated to marry the little peasant girl he'd been keeping as mistress. Once Tharil, emotionally destroyed by his beloved Emperor's death, ate his own blaster, his mourning widow had moved quickly to replace him. At eighteen years old she'd been the youngest Moff in Imperial history and in the post-Endor chaos nobody had tried to challenge her. They'd all had bigger problems.

Unfortunately for Moff Leonia Tavira, those problems had come to Eiattu. It had been almost a year since she'd been ousted from her world by the Rebels and their Rogue Squadron; a rough year by any measure, since she'd been forced from her Moff's palace and into the company of pirates and schemers, but like the tooka cats Dright liked to compare her to, Tavira was good at landing on her feet.

It was a short flight down into the lower layers of Bonadan's less-than-healthy atmosphere and into Spaceport Northeast II, the largest of the planet's many combination

city/transport complexes and, not coincidentally, where most of the CSA's administrative offices were currently housed. It was also, not coincidentally, where the *Marauder*-class corvette *Courtesan* was currently docked.

After boarding her ship, she exchanged short greetings with the present crew and headed for her quarters. She was unsurprised when Tyrac intercepted her near her cabin.

"I just heard you were back, Captain," the scarred man grinned. "Productive evening?"

Tavira tilted her head thoughtfully. "I think it was, yes."

"Drop anymore ships, did he?"

They'd often used information Dright slipped while on spice to raid ships coming or going through the edge of Authority space, including *Palustria*. The Viceprex talked so freely once he'd had some glitterstim that Tavira sometimes forced herself to hold off on attacks, just so it didn't get too obvious.

She slipped cooly past Tyrac and headed for her quarters. He called after her, "It's something bigger this time, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that?" she asked as she punched the keycode and opened the door to her cabin: not nearly as spacious as the one on Dright's yacht, but still pleasantly filled with spoils accumulated over the past year. It how she reminded herself that losing Eiattu had just been a minor setback.

"You know why," Tyrac said. "What is it?"

Tavira turned around and, leaning in the doorway, looked up at Tyrac. "It seems like the Viceprex is getting involved in dangerous business," she told him.

"You mean more dangerous than you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Something that could put his head on a platter and served to Ysanne Isard."

"Isard? What's she got to do with this?" Tyrac paused and thought. "Is he trying to strike a deal with Zsinj and start selling him CSA resources?"

"Even worse. Or better, depending on your perspective."

"The Rebels?"

She nodded.

"Is Dright actually going to *meet* with them?"

"It sounds like that's all still in the works. But I'll make sure to find out the details as they come."

"I'm sure you will." Tyrac laughed and shook his head. "Unbelievable. They're getting bold. You know who else is involved in this?"

Tavira shook her head. Tyrac's Force-powers might had let him read her emotions but if he tried to actually pry into her mind and dig out concrete information, she'd know. She'd seen him operate on prisoners before and it wasn't pretty. For the moment, she wasn't going to tell him the Prex was involved; he might try to sell that information himself.

"Well, keep your ears open, along with everything else. You plan on going to Isard with this?"

He laughed knowingly at her scowl. Tavira had helped Sate Pestage in his flight from Coruscant to Ciutric, then sold his location to Isard. The witch had promised a star destroyer for that and paid a pittance instead.

"All right," Tyrac shrugged, "We can kidnap them ourselves and hold them for ransom if they're important enough."

"Perhaps. Or we sell their location to the highest bidder. I'm sure Zsinj or Teradoc would be just as happy to capture a few Rebel leaders as Isard."

"Sounds good. I've always liked auctions. And if you need a little help getting things outta your Viceprex..." He tapped two fingers on his temple.

"Don't worry about that, Van." She put on the innocent, girlish smile she wore for Dright. "From him, I can get anything I want."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RUUSAN

When Captain Dagon Niriz saw those first blasts of Force-lighting arc out from Jerec's hand and catch Grand Admiral Thrawn in the chest, he saw the end of everything: the past four years of his life, the man he'd become in that shocking turbulent time, and worst of all, the future of the Empire and the stability of the galaxy itself.

The instant lasted less than a second, because he knew he could still act.

The first thing he did was call out, "Stage Eight!" The crew, most of whom couldn't see his screen and had no idea the grand admiral was in danger, complied with their usual crisp alacrity. Right on cue, the TIE Phantoms situated behind the further starboard engine section unleashed a volley that caused one glowing ion thruster to shudder and die out.

But that didn't do a thing. Through the Noghri's eyes, Niriz watched as Thrawn fell to the deck, smoke rising from his scorched white uniform. Snarling, Jerec ignited his lightsaber and stepped forward. The ensign seated next to him gasped.

"Quiet," Niriz warned her, though even he couldn't keep the panic from his voice.

"Captain," someone from the comm station called, "We're being hailed by Captain Sysco!"

"Ignore it," Niriz snapped as Jerec raised his other hand for another blast of deadly Force energy.

Niriz's mind wheeled. He tried to remember where the TIE Phantoms were currently situated, then picked the one he

thought was best-placed and said, "Tell Shadow Twelve to fly into that auxiliary hangar and decloak! Now!"

"Sir?" the tactical lieutenant gaped.

"Your heard me! Helm! All engines to full forward power! Ready all turbolasers! Do it now!"

Murmurs and motion rippled through the bridge crew. Even after the surgical strikes by the cloaked TIEs, *Vengeance* outgunned *Grey Wolf* ten-to-one. Their only hope was to vector close enough to the blind spot created by the torn-up starboard turbolaser batteries and hit it as hard as possible, though even that probably wouldn't be enough.

Grand Admiral Thrawn had told him to run if things went bad. Niriz knew he was disobeying a direct order but he didn't care. If Thrawn died here, everything worthwhile in the Empire would die with him.

Someone called, "Shadow Twelve is complying," but Niriz hardly noticed. His eyes went to the screen in front of him, where Jerec snarled, "So *witness!*" and unleashed another blast from his hands.

Akharan stood by the white admiral's side, stunned and frozen, as the man in black unleashed more sizzling blue magic from his hands. Thrawn, collapsed onto his knees on the deck, took the attack on the shoulders and writhed in soundless pain, hands scraping across the dark metal floor, smoke seeping from his mouth as he labored from one agonized breath to another. And as he shot the admiral through with evil energy, the dark man Jerec was *laughing*.

This wasn't right. Lord Darth Vader had promised to heal Honoghr, to save the Noghri people; this dark man seemed to take pleasure only in destruction and cruelty. He was a monster no Noghri clan should ever serve.

But Akharan stood where he was, frozen, stunner, scared.

After one more agonizing blast, Jerec lowered his lighting-hand to his side and hefted his glowing red saber instead. He looked around to the Noghri, grinning, and said, "Is there any question now? Is there any *doubt?* I *am* the New Vader, and that thing cowering before you?" He tipped the edge of his blade toward Thrawn. "He is *nothing*."

Suddenly there was the rush of wind at Akharan's back; a sudden heat, and a strange whining sound he couldn't place. Then he saw Ekhrikhor turn around and gasp. Akharan spun to follow his gaze, and immediately he saw it. The shining metal beast over their heads in the center of this vast chamber, against a backdrop of so-close stars: three black triangles like daggers jutting forward from the edges of a stout silver cylinder tipped by round black glass, like a giant eye.

One moment there had been nothing; and then, this. It was all too much magic. Akharan fell to his knees, trembling.

And Jerec stood two steps away from Thrawn with his glowing red sword hefted in his hand. The giant metal beast pointed the tips of its three black daggers directly at Jerec, and for the first time, the man in black looked afraid.

The deck shuddered again under some distant impact. Then Akharan heard a sound beside him. It was Thrawn, struggling to sit upright. Smoke still rose from his scorched clothes and his body hacked with heavy coughs that sprayed droplets of black blood on the deck.

But he sat up on his knees, fixed his red eyes ahead, and rasped, "You are no Vader, Jerec. You never were. Now go."

Jerec snarled and lunged. Without thinking, Akharan threw himself against Thrawn. They both went skidding across the deck, while Jerec's sword sliced through air where they'd just been. Before Jerec could attack again, one of the Noghri who'd been at his side leaped forward, knife ready, and sunk it into the man's leg. He snarled and slashed out with his red sword, cutting the Noghri's head clean off. He tried to lunge for Thrawn again but his wounded leg gave out from under him, and he fell forward hard.

Akharan pulled out his knife. So did Ekhrikhor. Before either could attack Jerec Thrawn called out, "Wait!"

The admiral brushed soot off his uniform and stood of shaking legs. Akharan, stunned the man could stand at all after so much pain, braced him on one side; Ekhrikor on the other.

"Take your planet, Lord Jerec," Thrawn sneered. "Be lucky you have that."

The man in black lurched back toward his remaining stormtroopers; in a flash, the other five Noghri who'd once stood at Jerec's side had neatly disarmed them.

Jerec saw this and shook his head. He reared up on two trembling legs and snarled at the massive metal beast still hovering above them.

"Fine, then." Jerec waved a hand. "Take your Noghri. I have my Dark Jedi waiting for me on Ruusan, and when we open the Valley of the Jedi, all your tricks, all your schemes, all your stupid little toys will be *nothing*! Do you hear me? *Nothing*!"

"I look forward to your next challenge," Thrawn said, then coughed up more blood.

Jerec started limping toward the door at the far end of the hangar. His stormtroopers moved to help him but he angrily shook them away.

"Inquisitor!" Thrawn called after him.

"What?" Jerec hissed without turning back.

"I was never here."

The man in black wretched with a bitter laugh. "All right. I understand. I'll keep your secret then."

He held up one hand and snapped his fingers. In an instant, all of his white-shelled guards clattered limp to the floor.

"Does *that* satisfy you, Admiral?"

"It will suffice," Thrawn said softly.

Jerec grunted and continued to limp away, until he finally stepped through the door and disappeared. Only then did the metal beast overhead shimmer out of existence, like an eidolon or a bad dream. Akharan felt another rush of heat and wind, and knew it was gone for good.

The oldest Noghri walked up to Thrawn and prostrated himself. The four with him followed, and Ekhriktor and Akharan quickly joined him in venerating the battered but unbeaten admiral before them.

"I am Relvash of Clan Baikh'vair and I will witness that you, Admiral, are truly Vader's heir."

"I'm glad to head it," Thrawn said dryly as another loud noise filled the hangar.

Akharan looked behind him to see another large, white, three-winged metal beast soar into the chamber and set down

next to the one they'd arrived in. When its ramps swung down, a crew of humans in white rushed to the admiral's side.

"I'll be all right, in time," Thrawn breathed as the doctors started to examine him. "Please, take these Noghri back to *Grey Wolf*."

Another human in a gray uniform waved Relvash toward the shuttle. Relvash motioned for the younger Noghri to follow him. Ekhrikhor didn't hesitate to join them, and Akharan fell in behind his clan leader.

He only got one step before a hand clapped on his shoulder. He turned around and saw the admiral gazing right at him with those glowing red eyes.

He quickly prostrated himself, pressing his face against the cold metal floor. "Yes, New Vader?"

"You are... Akharan of Clan Bakh'tor, are you not?"

"That is correct, New Vader."

"Do not call me that. I am not Darth Vader. I'm simply your lord."

"Yes, Lord."

"What you did was very brave."

"Thank you, Lord."

"You will not be going with the others."

His heart trembled. He didn't know if he was being rewarded or punished. "I don't understand, my Lord."

"Look up, Akharan. Look at me."

The Noghri raised his head and looked his lord in the eyes.

"I have a special mission for you," Thrawn said. "And you must act quickly."

It took Niriz the better part of an hour after Thrawn was brought back aboard *Grey Wolf* to go down to the medical ward and see his admiral.

Thrawn was seated upright in one of the beds. His face had been washed clean, his hair straightened; his posture was alert as he browsed a datapad in his lap. Were it not for the white medical robe draped over his shoulders, he could have looked as he always did in his cabin or on the bridge.

Niriz immediately snapped to a salute, which Thrawn acknowledged with a wordless bow of the head.

"I want to apologize, sir," Niriz said.

"And why am I owed an apology?" Thrawn raised a blue-black eyebrow.

"I deliberately disobeyed your orders, sir. I'll accept full responsibility for me actions."

Thrawn gave a tiny sigh. "At ease, Captain."

Niriz lowered his hand to his side, but didn't loosen his posture. He was too nervous to even breath.

"Captain, if I owe you anything it is thanks, not a reprimand. Without your quick thinking I'd have fallen victim to my own arrogance."

"To Jerec's Force magic, sir."

"I knew Jerec's power. What I underestimated was his vindictiveness."

"Frankly, sir, I'm surprised you let him live." When the Inquisitor had so casually snapped the necks of his stormtrooper bodyguards, Niriz had wanted to reach through the screen and kill Jerec himself. It was that kind of callous brutality and casual disregard for soldiers' lives that had driven many people away from the Empire in the first place.

"If I'd ordered those Noghri to attack him," said Thrawn, "It's very likely he'd have killed them all before they killed him. That would have done us no good."

"Sir, right now *Vengeance* is damaged but still a threat."

"Let it remain so. We've gotten what we came for. Arrange a barracks for those six Noghri and keep them there."

"I will sir." Niriz thought a moment. "Six, sir? I thought only one was killed."

"This is correct. However, Akharan did not return with the rest to *Grey Wolf*. I had a special assignment for him."

"Was that the Noghri with the transmitter in his eye, sir?"

"The very same, though by now he's out of range of any relay, so we won't be able to see his progress. No matter. I'm confident he'll perform his task with zeal."

"Admiral, is *he* to kill Jerec?"

"Only if an easy opportunity presents itself. I believe Jerec will be taking a shuttle down to the planet's surface, if he hasn't already. Akharan will monitor Jerec's progress, and if he can, take the ship being used by Rebel agents there back to their home fleet. The young Noghri is not entirely used to our technology, but Noghri are natural-born infiltrators and

fast learners. I believe he will succeed. I've provided him with a portable comm system through which we can call him and give orders once he's infiltrated the enemy fleet."

Niriz was starting to feel dizzy. "*Rebel* agents? Sir, I had no idea—"

"Oh yes. I when we first entered the system I noted the handful of support vessels clustered around *Vengeance*. One vessel, identifying itself as *High Hauler*, was of the same type as an Imperial transport recently captured by the Rebels at Milagro."

Even now, the grand admiral still amazed him. "This automatically occurred to you, sir?"

"I thought it worth investigating." He tapped the datapad in his lap. "I didn't have time before, but the report the medics brought me seems to confirm that *High Hauler* is, indeed, the ship captured at Milagro."

Niriz shook his head. "And where did you get a list of captured ships?"

"Unlike Jerec, Captain, I did not burn my bridges with fleet intelligence on Coruscant, and therefore have up-to-date information. It was, incidentally, the same place I received the schematics for *Vengeance* and the TIE Phantoms. I trust they were all recovered?"

"The cloaked TIEs? Yes, sir. Not one was damaged."

"Excellent."

"Sir, was there anything your, ah, contact wanted in exchange for all this help he gave?" He'd figured it wasn't Isard, but that was as far as he'd gotten.

"Of course there was," Thrawn said plainly. "Captain, when you return to the bridge, please go the comm system and initiate the stored transmission titled Sigma-Epsilon-Seventy-eight. Your own authorization will suffice."

"And what's in this transmission?"

"A call for my contact to come pick up his new super star destroyer."

"He wanted *Vengeance*?" Niriz blew out a breath. "Even with the damage we did, she could still put up a good fight."

"Only if her captain wants to fight, and is willing to suffer the resulting attrition."

"If Jerec can control his crew's minds and force them to fight-"

"That is why I wish to confirm Jerec is on Ruusan. Once there, I suspect he won't much care what happens in orbit."

"Sir, everything he said about this... Valley of the Jedi, and unimaginable Force power..."

"Is it true?"

Niriz nodded weakly.

"Who can say? There is clearly something behind Jerec's magic, just as there was Vader's. This encounter makes me more convinced than ever that Jedi powers are a gateway to madness. If we ever encounter such beings again, I'm going to have to take extra precautions."

"Frankly, sir, I hope that day never comes."

"As do I. But we must be prepared for any eventuality."

"I suppose that's true enough, sir. Where will we go now?"

"I believe we should return those TIE Phantoms to their facility at Improcco."

"All right. I'll set a course."

"And please, Captain, see if you can confirm whether Jerec's shuttle, or any shuttle, has left *Vengeance* for Ruusan."

"I'll do that, sir. Now please, rest up."

"Thank you, Captain. For everything."

There was a touch of earnestness there Niriz wasn't used to hearing. He snapped Thrawn one more salute, then turned and made his way up to the bridge.

The whole ride there he couldn't get one thing out of his mind. If Thrawn's ally- whoever it was- really wanted to take *Vengeance*, he'd still need a huge fleet, and even then hundreds of thousands more would die until that super star destroyer were pounded into submission. Once that was done, it would probably take months to fix the ship back into fighting shape. It all seemed such a miserable waste of good Imperial lives.

When he got to the bridge he was informed that yes, a single shuttle had departed from Ruusan and apparently landed near some excavation site on the surface. That was some comfort, but not enough.

An idea occurred to him. It was a stupid long shot idea, but then, one of those had just saved Thrawn's life. Niriz walked over to the comm station and asked for a private line, directed through his comlink, to Captain Sysco.

When he answered, he sounded angry and tired at the same time. "Is this the captain of the *Grey Wolf*?"

"This is Dagon Niriz, correct."

"Captain, if you can pardon my informality, what the devil did you do to my bloody ship? And *why*?"

"This was not about you, Captain. I assure you," Niriz said as he walked into a quiet hallway behind the bridge. "It was about the man you work for."

"I thought as much," Sysco grumbled.

"Captain, we noticed a shuttle departing for the planet's surface. Was Inquisitor Jerec on that shuttle?"

There was a long static silence before Sysco said, "Yes."

"Tell me, Captain, did you volunteer to serve under the Inquisitor? Was it a position you requested?"

"Are you asking about my loyalties?"

"I am." There was no point in being coy.

"I was offered the chance to captain a super star destroyer. Would *you* turn it down?"

If it meant working for a monster like Jerec, yes, but Niriz chose to be diplomatic. "I think there are more important things than which ship I stand on. I wanted to serve the Empire and keep order. I still do that. I'm sure you must have taken the same vow, once upon a time."

Sysco's sigh crackled with static. "You know, Captain, I've very much like to know who it is *you* work for."

Niriz thought on Jerec's dead bodyguards and shuddered. "I'm afraid I can't allow that. But rest assured I'm a loyal servant of the Empire. I hope you are too. For your sake."

"Are you trying to intimidate me, Captain?"

"I'm trying to advise you." Niriz hesitated, but only for a second. He'd already take one step; he might as well take another. "Captain, we'll be departing this system shortly. When we go, we'll send a message calling a fleet loyal to Director Isard to Ruusan. They'll want your ship, as intact as possible. The way I see it, you have three options. You can flee the Ruusan system now, you can fight and die, or you

can surrender. I believe that if you *do* surrender, and forswear your previous allegiance to Jerrec, you'll be met with mercy." Niriz didn't know the last part was true at all, but he hoped; for Sysco's sake, for his crew's, for the Empire's.

There was a long, long pause. Just when Niriz thought he wouldn't answer, Sysco said, "Thank you for telling me, Captain."

"I wanted to help a fellow officer."

"Yes. I see that. I will... take it under consideration. Thank you."

The comm line closed with a faint click. Niriz sighed and stuck his commlink in his pocket. When he walked out onto the bridge *Vengeance* was sitting dead ahead, a scarred black knife cutting across the red-gold surface of Ruusan. It was a beautiful ship, in a sinister way. He hoped he never saw it again.

"Helm," he called, "Start warming the hyperdrives. We're getting out of here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR ***TRIVIGAUNTE***

The rest of their trip to Orron III wasn't that bad, all things considered. Syal Antilles and Korlo Brightwater were stuffed into a cabin the size of a closet and the food was terrible, but at least they *had* food to eat, and they weren't freezing cold either. The interrogations weren't that bad either. At least, that was what Brightwater said.

After their captors had marched them to the room and tied them both to a pair of chairs with flexi-cable, they'd promptly disappeared. Several hours later they returned: the same blue-skinned humanoid and his gun-toting feline companion, plus a decidedly obese red-haired human. Syal recognized him from the cafe on Corsin, and after a second remembered the blue-skinned humanoid had been with him too.

The fat man pulled in a seat from outside the cabin and sat his bulk down in front of them. The other two closed the door and remained standing. They both had blaster pistols holstered at their hips and hands at their sides, but didn't seem ready to draw. Syal wondered if they had any actual rifles on this ship, or if pistols was all. She wondered if they had any more fighting-ready men besides these two.

The fat man leaned forward, right elbow on right knee, and looked them over with his small blue eyes. They went to Brightwater first, then Syal, then back to Brightwater. Then he said, "Give me one good reason not to flush you out an airlock right now."

"That would be murder," Syal said.

"I said a *good* reason." He kept his eyes on Brightwater.

The other man shifted in his seat the best he could with his hands tied to the back of his chair. "If you kill us, you're a dead man. I guarantee it."

"And why is that?" the fat man sounded amused.

"Because I'm a special operative working under the direct command of Imperial regent Ysanne Isard."

The fat man flinched, but covered it quickly. He put on an amused smile and said, "Really, now? And why would Madam Isard's elite agent stow away aboard my ship?"

"I was pursuing a fugitive."

"Her, I take it," the fat man nodded at Syal.

"You have no idea how valuable that woman is."

"She doesn't look like much to me. Tell me, Mister- ah, what should I call you?"

"What should I call *you*?"

The fat man chuckled, apparently amused. "Call me Phelan Waylox. It's my name."

"And you're the owner of this ship?"

"That's correct. Your name?"

"Daric Marcross."

"And your prisoner's name?"

She opened her mouth, but Brightwater interjected, "You can't guess?"

Waylox scowled. "Don't play games with me. How would I know who this little wastrel is?"

Brightwater gave a dry chuckle and said, "She's Wynssa Starflare."

Syal's jaw dropped. As she glared angrily at Brightwater, Waylox leaned in a little closer to inspect her face with those beady eyes.

Then he tilted his head back and gave a great, big belly laugh. Slapping a knee, he said, "Oh, my young friend, if you keep on entertaining me like that I might *not* spare you. Because for a second, I thought I saw something, something around the chin, or the nose. But no. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Desperately."

"I bet you and your woman ran into some trouble on Corsin. Maybe you decided to steal some money from her

father, I don't know, but you had to get offworld before the grandfather-to-be found out, so you grabbed my ship. Maybe you think you can strike it rich in the Corporate Sector. Lots of people do and they're mostly wrong."

"You seem to be doing okay."

"I am not most people." Waylox put on a predatory grin, and Syal was scared again. He looked over his shoulder at the blue-skinned man and said, "What do you think, Olith?"

"Sir, I think his story may be worth considering."

Red eyebrows drew together. "How so?"

"When we took his belongings, he did have multiple identicard cases on him. One of them was like nothing I've ever seen before. It had the logo for the Imperial Security Bureau faintly embossed in one corner. I couldn't find any card with *his* name on it, but I found one for the woman. It said she was from Imperial Center."

"I don't support her name's really Wynssa Starflare?"

"No, sir."

Waylox turned a newly-intense gaze on Syal and Brightwater. "What else did you find, Olith?"

"He had two blasters on him. One looked like a civilian hold-out model, but the other was an Imperial-issue DC-22 service pistol."

"Well, that is interesting. Tell me, Mister, ah, Marcross, what were you doing in the auxiliary communications room?"

"Oh, that's where we were? Wynssa here, she needed to use the 'fresher but we took a wrong turn."

"You were calling someone. That's how we found you. Who was it?"

"Would you believe Ysanne Isard herself?"

"No, I wouldn't." Waylox tapped a thick finger against his chins. "Olith, what kind of job did he do on that comm system?"

"He tried a rewire so we wouldn't notice it was in use. He did the same with a couple doors. He did a pretty good job, but not the best I've seen. Nothing I couldn't have done."

"The work of one of Ysanne Isard's elite agents, then?"

"Probably not, but he could still be ISB."

"He could also be some middling tech from Corsin who eloped with his girlfriend." Waylox gave a big-bodied sigh. "Any chance you can figure out who he was talking to?"

"I'll do my best," Olith said, though he didn't sound confident.

"All right, then. We'll keep them here for now. Post a guard at all times."

"Yes, sir."

Waylox heaved himself out of his chair and look down considerably at the two captives. "Please, make yourselves comfortable."

Olith and the felinoid walked out the door, and Waylox followed behind him, dragging his chair. The door hissed shut, and Syal heard locks tumbling into place.

"Amateurs," Brightwater said, so low Syal could barely hear. "Didn't even split us up for questioning. Let us know they couldn't trace our call either."

"Why did you tell them that?" she hissed. "Do you realize how *dangerous* that was?"

"Oh, definitely. But who'd believe it?"

"They still might look into it."

"Well, look on the bright side. If they *do* find out, at least they won't space you."

"This isn't time to joke! We need to get out of here!"

"Listen, our best chance is that they keep us alive until we get to Orron III."

And hope LaRone and the others would rescue them. Syal still didn't like sitting helpless, waiting for someone else to rescue her. At that point she hardly cared who Brightwater and his friends really worked for; even if he *did* work for Isard, her priority now was to stay on the right side of *Trivigaunte's* airlock.

"Listen," Brightwater said, voice still low, "If they come back, they might think to split us up. You need to act like you're Wynssa Starflare."

"What?"

"I said *act* like her. Not *be* her."

"You mean act like some girl from Corsin *pretending* to be her?"

"Exactly. You *can* act, right?"

"That's what they paid me for," she grunted.

"Good." After a tiny pause, Brightwater added, "I was always a Javul Charn man, actually. No offense."

"Oh." Syal blinked. "She's nice."

"Really? Good. 'Cause you hear how actors can seem great and then in-person they're total... But whatever. Just be ready."

"What if they trace your call?"

"They'll try, but they won't get it. LaRone won't respond to anything without my encryption code. And that'll make them even more confused."

"Do you want them to think we're runaways or do you want them to think we're...." She almost said *the real thing*.

"The more confused they are, the longer they'll hold off spacing us."

"Well," Syal breathed, "Sounds like a plan, then."

And just as Brightwater predicted, when their captors returned the prisoners were split up. Olith did most of the questioning this time. Syal summoned the acting skills that had, surprisingly, not dulled at all after six months on the run. She cycled through a bunch of different personae for Olith's viewing pleasure: First she was the wanna-be actress pretending to be Wynssa Starflare, then she was the nervous woman who'd been strong-armed into running from home by her domineering boyfriend, then she went back to being the wannabe Starflare who'd bought a fake ID card just so she could slip off Corsin and seek her fortune, and finally she was turning on the water-works, begging them not to send her back to Corsin because her father would absolutely definitely *kill* her.

In all honestly, she kind of enjoyed putting on the show. It had been too long.

After they put her and Brightwater back in the same room, nobody came to talk to them for over a day-cycle, though once the guard dropped in and put food trays in front of them, though it was hard to eat with hands bound at the wrists.

Before the ship went into its second night-cycle, Waylox came back. Olith wasn't with him, though the felinoid guard lingered in the doorway with his gun very visible. Syal was starting to hope they were the only three people onboard.

Waylox clasped his pudgy hands on his belly and looked down at the prisoners with dignity. "You two are an interesting case, I'll admit that. So in the end, I think I'm not going to space you."

Syal tried very hard to hide her relief.

"Instead, I'll be doing what ships in the Corporate Sector are legally instructed to do with stowaways. I've put in a call to the CSA defense fleet. They'll be sending a corvette to pick you up once we reach Orron III. After that," he waved a hand dismissively, "you're their problem."

"Director Isard won't like this," Brightwater said angrily.

"Then she can take it up with the CSA. I just want you brats off my ship." Without a word of farewell, Waylox turned and walked out the door. It slid shut behind him, leaving them alone again.

"Well," Syal breathed, "It's up to your friends now."

Hand of Judgment arrived in the Orron system two-thirds of a standard day before *Trivigaunte* did and spent those spare hours hiding on the dark side of Orron III's second moon, trying to hail Brightwater. Their calls went unanswered the entire time, and when *Trivigaunte* finally did drop into Orron III's outer orbit, they gave it one last try. Once again, Brightwater didn't answer, and that meant he was in trouble.

That was bad news, but the one upside was that they'd had two-thirds of a day to prepare for an extraction mission. All things considered, they could have been in better shape. They still needed Quiller to fly their ship and Marcross wasn't good for anything except manning the gunnery controls, which meant it was up to LaRone and Grave to actually board the ship, retrieve both Brightwater and Starflare, and get out. If Brightwater was still able-bodied enough to run and gun, it was still probably doable. If not-

Well, LaRone would think of something if it came to that.

When *Trivigaunte* dropped out of hyperspace it kicked in its retro-burners and slowed its approach. For some reason it seemed like it wanted to hang in upper orbit instead of beginning its descent to the planet. LaRone didn't bother to

worry about the why of it. It was the exact opening they needed. He ordered Quiller to charge.

Hand of Judgment swung around the moon and accelerated at full power toward the hauler. Quiller hailed *Trivigaunte*, ordered its crew to stand down, and fired a pair of warning shots across their bow. The ship responded with a volley from its defensive cannons, which were easy to avoid even as *Hand of Judgment* tore a straight line to intercept.

Marcross was manning the gunner controls, and even though he was a little woozy from the anti-pain medication, *Trivigaunte* was a big target to miss. Blue energy blasts shot out from *Hand of Judgment's* forward ion cannon and hit the freighter's forward control cabin. Blue lightning arced around as Quiller shot past their bow and pulled a steep turn for another pass. This time Marcross pumped three ion shots into the hauler's rear engines. Two of the three went dark and the third blazed brighter to compensate and keep the ship from falling toward Orron III.

For good measure, they made one more pass. Manning the forward laser cannons himself, Quiller blasted both of *Trivigaunte's* defensive turrets clean off the hull, rendering the ship completely helpless. Finally, Marcross targeted their long-range communications array with his ion cannon and overloaded its systems with one more burst of blue energy.

It took all of ninety seconds to render *Trivigaunte* helpless from the outside. Next came the hard part.

Quiller swung *Hand of Judgment* around to couple its ventral airlock with the hauler's starboard portal. Even with their comms and sensors blinded, there was a good chance the ship's crew would expect a boarding party and be ready to meet them.

Even before *Trivigaunte* dropped out of hyperspace, LaRone and Grave were geared up and ready to go: BlasTech E-11 rifles DC-22 service pistols, Merr-Sonn flash grenades, synthex grappling cables, utility vibro-knives, and of course, full suits of white stormtrooper armor.

Strange as it seemed, it felt good to be inside a full kit again.

Trivigaunte wasn't going to casually open its airlock for the intruders, but it didn't matter. Once their ship coupled

ports, Grave and LaRone began laying a line of charge-wire along the edge of the ship's sealed door. That took less than a minute, and once it was done they fell back to the vestibule and set off the charge. Sparks flared all around the border as the superheated cable burned through the reinforced dura-steel portal. The breach was marked by a loud *pop* and a rush of wind as air pressure matched between the two ships.

LaRone and Grave charged in at the first noise, plunging through the smoke and still-leaping sparks and into *Trivigaunte*. LaRone clung to the left wall, Grave to the right as red laser-blasts flashed at them through the smoke. Unlike the hauler's crew, LaRone and Grave could summon infra-red scopes through their helmet visors, and they could easily pinpoint the three defenders at the far end of the hall.

One was confident enough to try to step clear out from behind his cover; LaRone dropped him with a single stun blast. That distracted another crewman, who Grave managed to wing with another blue bolt. The crewman- some kind of felinoid alien- reeled back and dropped his gun. LaRone switched to full power on his E-11 and sprayed red blasts low across the deck, catching the felinoid in the legs and knocking him over.

The third crewman ducked behind a bulkhead and didn't return fire. Grave and LaRone strode steadily toward the end of the hall, weapons ready and level just in case there was a surprise waiting. There wasn't: only a T-shaped intersection, empty in both directions. Grave jumped forward and kicked the felinoid's pistol out of reach, even though the crewman was too busy clutching his legs with both paws and generally writhing in pain to notice.

As LaRone stuck the gun in his belt, Grave bent low and grabbed the felinoid by the back of his neck. The alien bared long fangs as Grave bent his helmet right into his face.

"Where are your prisoners? One man, one woman, both humans. Where are they?"

LaRone angled his gun. "Next one's through your cranium, furball. *Where?*"

Panting through his teeth, the felinoid said, "Two decks down... Storage room..."

"How do we get there?" barked LaRone.

“Go right.... Take lift.... Right down hall...”

He might have been lying, he might not. They didn’t have the time for a full interrogation, so Grave dropped him on the deck. He and LaRone pounded down the hall and through the door, leaving him to writhe there.

Syal thought something was wrong when the lights started flickering; then she heard the groan of two engines failing and knew it for sure.

“Is that your friends?” she asked Brightwater. They’d both been tied to their chairs again, arms and legs both.

“Either that or pirates, I’d say.”

“Well, I hope it’s your friends,” she muttered, and she really did. She still didn’t know who Brightwater worked for or what his plan was. She’d found she kind of *liked* the man, and that alone was a stupid thing to base trust on, but at this point the only other option was to get handed over to the CSA patrol, and unlike the crew of this hauler they might actually be thorough enough to discover who their prisoner really was, in which case a date with Ysanne Isard was dead certain.

She heard footsteps pounding outside and held her breath. The door slid open too easily; she was unsurprised to see Olith and Waylox filling the threshold. The human had a hold-out blaster that looked comically tiny in his big fleshy hand, but it didn’t stop her from wincing when he waved it in her direction.

“They’re stormtroopers! *Stormtroopers* on my ship!” Waylox sounded more amazed than anything.

“Should’ve listened to me.” Brightwater bore his teeth. “Now Isard’s gonna flay you alive.”

From behind his boss, Olith said, “Sir, we have to move them *now*. If we can get to an escape pod-”

“I know.” Waylox waved the pistol again. “Cut them free! Get them out of here!”

A vibro-blade appeared in Olith’s hand and he quickly swung around behind Syal and Brightwater to cut their bindings. They’d been tied to the chairs for so long that standing up was an awkward wobbly process; all the while Waylox kept his pistol raised at them. She knew Brightwater

must have been gaming it in his head, wondering if it was worth the risk to lunge at Waylox and go for his weapon.

That didn't last long. Olith pocketed his knife and pulled out his own pistol. "Okay, both of you, hands on your heads and march, *now!*"

"Where are you taking us?" Brightwater put his hands up but didn't move.

"I said *move!*" Olith shoved him forward so hard he lost his balance. As he gave Brightwater another push into the hallway, Waylox sidled beside Syal and grabbed her arm with a strong one-handed grip.

"Whoever you are, girl, you must be important after all," he hissed.

"You'll never get away."

He shook his head. "That CSA ship will be here any minute. Once they pick up our escape pod--"

His words were suddenly drowned out by pounding boots and blaring voices. Two stormtroopers appeared at the far end of the corridor, rifles raised, both shouting at Olith and Waylox to throw down their weapons.

Olith stopped dead in his tracks, swore, and threw his gun aside. Brightwater immediately grabbed him from behind, wrenched him into an elbow-lock, and slammed his face against the bulkhead.

"Olith!" Waylox screamed. He didn't drop his gun.

"Put it down!" one of the stormtroopers shouted. "Let her go! *Now!*"

The fat man shifted his grip with the pistol and leveled it at Syal's head. She couldn't hide her shuddering as he hissed, "Let me through or I blow this woman's brains out. You came all this way to get her alive, didn't you?"

"This is your last warning!" the lead stormtrooper called. "Drop it! *Now!*"

"No! I'm getting off this ship and she's coming with me. And then--"

The stormtrooper fired. A single red last blast flashed down the hall and caught Waylox right between the eyes. His huge body went instantly limp; one hand released Syal's arm and the blaster spilled from the other. He tumbled face-down to the deck with a muffled *thud*.

“Okay, let’s go!” Brightwater shouted. He forcefully threw Olith across his boss’s body, then grabbed Syal by the shoulder. The second stormtrooper scooped up the two blaster pistolss on the floor and took up the rear while the first guided Brightwater and Syal to the turbolift and out of the ship.

As the four of them hurried through *Trivigaunte*’s shattered airlock and into a second ship, Brightwater said, “LaRone, get us out of here fast. They called a CSA patrol ship. It could be here at any-”

As if on cue, a voice blared over the ship’s interior speakers. “Boss, we got incoming! Is everyone aboard?”

“Got the package, got Korlo too.” The lead stormtrooper pulled off his helmet. “Grave! Seal that airlock so we can burn out of here!”

As the second stormtrooper followed his orders, LaRone and Brightwater took Syal by the shoulders and hurried her down the hall. LaRone pushed her into a small storage room, the same size as the cell she’d just been busted out of, only this one had a cushioned acceleration couch.

“Brightwater, strap her in!” LaRone ordered. “This could get messy!”

“Got it, boss.”

LaRone rushed out of the room, leaving Syal and Brightwater alone again. The ship lurched free of its coupling port and inertia nearly knocked Syal off her feet.

“You need to get in there now,” Brightwater pointed at the couch. “I’ll see how I can fit the crash webbing.”

For a second she thought that voluntarily strapping herself into that thing would be surrendering her last chance of possible freedom to this group of strangers whom she had no reason to trust, who for all she knew really *were* working for Isard; it seemed more likely now than ever, given the gear they’d barged in with.

The ship lurched again, and she could have fallen onto her stomach if Brightwater hadn’t sprung forward to catch her.

“Okay,” she breathed against his chest, “Let’s do it.”

The pilot’s chamber on the top level of *Hand of Judgment* was barely more spacious than a starfighter cockpit, but

LaRone clambered up the ladder and hung tight on the back of Quiller's seat anyway.

"What have we got?" he asked as the viewport swung away from the glowing gold-brown sphere of Orron III.

"Scanners say one CSA corvette, launching IRD interceptors. How's the package?"

"Brightwater's strapping in your girlfriend right now."

"Run now, jokes later."

Red laser-blasts streaked across their viewport. Quiller swore and wrenched them around to face the planet again.

"Are they blocking our escape route?" asked LaRone.

"Sure looks that way." Quiller tapped his comm console. "Hey, Marcross, you back there?"

"I need a better angle. This turret isn't a full three-sixty."

The ship shuddered as the IRD fighters sprayed laser blasts on their shields. Quiller grimaced and threw *Hand of Judgment* into a tight spin that nearly smashed LaRone against the starboard bulkhead.

"You get a shot?" Quiller called.

"Think I got one," Marcross said from the deck below. "Plenty more left."

Quiller glanced at his scanners. "They're trying to pin our backs to the planet. That corvette's fast too."

"We want to get *away* from the planet," LaRone reminded him as Orron III swelled to fill their viewport. "Can we try and punch through?"

"This ship is tough, but if those IRDs have- Oh, damn."

"What?"

"Incoming concussion missiles. Hold on. I think I can launch some chaff."

Quiller punched a button on the console and wrenched his ship into another series of wild corkscrews. As LaRone locked both arms around the back of Quiller's chair he saw something light up on his console.

"Did we get the missiles?"

"Dunno, something hit the chaff, but--"

The ship rocked more violently; red lights and alarms blared inside the cockpit and LaRone's stomach lurched.

"Just lost one engine!" Quiller announced. "Trying to compensate!"

“Just get us away from that planet!”

“Aw, fierfek, that corvette’s swinging around, they’re gonna hit our flank!”

“What about the shields?”

“The shields are-”

Something smashed into their stern, sending them into a spin. Quiller was swearing and wrestling with the controls but LaRone hardly noticed as the force of impact knocked his head hard against the bulkhead. As his mind swam through a daze of noise and light and motion the stupid thought flashed through his head: *Should have kept the helmet on.*

If *that* was what was going to get him killed, after all he’d been through, after all he’d dragged the rest of his squad through these past four years-

Well, it would prove the universe really did have a sense of humor.

The ship shuddered again. Up ahead, the gold-brown glow of Orron III entirely filled their viewport. It almost looked close enough to touch. LaRone unlocked one arm from the back of Quiller’s seat and reached over his shoulder to grab the planet ahead. Then there was another violent motion and he lost his footing, and he was plunging down the shaft he’d climbed out of, down into darkness that wouldn’t end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HOME ONE

“General Cracken wasn’t happy about it. Neither was Ackbar. But I’m going.”

As he said it, Wedge looked out at the people crammed into his cabin: Tycho and Winter sat side-by-side on the bed, Janson and Hobbie claimed his small dining table, and Fel stood with his back against the door.

“To be honest, Wedge, I’m surprised they let you,” Hobbie said.

“I didn’t exact phrase it as a question. More like a demand.”

“How is this op supposed to work exactly?” asked Janson.

“I’ll be flying a captured TIE used for scouting missions. They put in an advanced sensor package that will scan for this isotope marker than Syal’s been dropping.

“Hopefully,” glowered Fel.

“Hopefully,” Wedge echoed. “And since I’ll be in the neighborhood I’ll also pick up all sorts of data on Coruscant’s defenses.”

Winter said, “After Isard purged most of Cracken’s people we’ve had a hard time keeping track of what’s been going on in the capital. That’s important intel, Wedge.”

“I know.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “But that’s not why I’m doing it.”

A grim silence fell over the room. Tycho looked down at his hands. He wanted to jump up and shake Wedge by the shoulders and tell him this was all kinds of stupid, that he had a responsibility to lead Rogue Squadron, a responsibility

Tycho himself didn't want and never had, but the Wedge Antilles in front of him now wasn't the Wedge he'd known for years. The real, tangible threat this his sister, his last remaining family member, might be forever lost had triggered something new in him.

"You know I would go if I could," Fel told Wedge.

"I do," the other man nodded, "But if this goes bad, well... Better Isard grabs me than you."

"How long will you be gone?" asked Janson.

"If all goes to plan, two weeks. They've got a freighter that will carry me to Coruscant. Specially designed with a sensor-shielded hangar to conceal the TIE fighter."

"Super-sized smuggler hold, basically," said Janson.

Wedge nodded. "They'll release me in orbit then hop out of the system. I'll fly some loops around Coruscant, then drop down into the atmosphere. Even if Syal's not on the planet I'll be able to trace her last position before she left, along with the timing."

"Cracken's people can reconstruct a lot from those tracers," Winter said. She was probably trying to be encouraging but Tycho wished she'd stop it.

"Wedge, how much experience do you have with TIEs?" asked Hobbie.

"Not as much as you, Tycho, or Fel. But I've flown them. And this isn't going to be combat piloting."

"What happens if Imp traffic controls starts wondering why some stray TIE is flying loops all over?" asked Tycho. It was the first thing he'd said since Wedge spilled his whole plan and he didn't care if he sounded ultra-negative.

"The TIE has a special IFF transponder that identifies it as a survey ship for local security. If I have to, I can talk my way out of it."

"How do you get off the planet?"

"Well, there's a place I can land where I'll meet with whatever NRI agents are left on Coruscant. They'll make sure all my data gets transmitted."

"And get you off the planet?"

He nodded. "That's the idea."

"Two weeks."

"To Coruscant and back again. That's the plan."

Tycho looked across the room at Fel. "Do *you* think this is a good idea?"

"I'm not happy about it, but it's the best we have. I just said that if they'd let me into that TIE I'd fly it myself. And if I can't do it, there's no one else I'd rather have flying that op than Syal's brother."

A look passed between Wedge and Fel, one Tycho hadn't seen before. It looked like real trust.

Tycho sighed and pushed off the bed. He gestured for Winter to stay seating and said, "Wedge, can we talk in the hall for a minute?"

Fel moved aside to let them pass. The pale, narrow corridor of *Home One's* officer habitat deck was empty and quiet. Tycho led Wedge ten meters down the hall, away from the cabin, before he spun around and hissed, "Wedge, what the kark do you think you're *doing*?"

His friend didn't blink. "I'm doing everything I can to get my sister back."

"There's plenty of people who can fly TIEs in loops."

"I trusted this to other people before. I'm not doing it again."

"I can't believe Ackbar's letting you do this."

"I told him that if he didn't, I'd resign my commission."

Tycho stared. When he finally found words he said, "You were always the good soldier, Wedge. What about the Rogues? The Republic? We need you flying, fighting, leading the charge, Wedge. We *all* need you."

Wedge softened his tone and said, "You'll be a fine Rogue Leader while I'm gone. I'm not worried about you at all. Besides, we don't have any big missions coming up."

"That you know of. A lot can happen in two weeks. *If* you come back by then."

"Tycho, I have to do this. If you thought there was a chance, just a tiny chance, that Nyiestra or any of your family could still be alive, and they were in trouble, and on the run—"

"Don't ask me that," Tycho snapped. "That's not fair."

"All right," Wedge held up his hands. "But just try to imagine. Because that's where I am right now, Tycho. I can't sit around and wait for her to get rescued, not any more."

“You don’t trust Cracken?”

He shook his head fiercely. “I don’t trust him to get the job done. Not any more.”

“They’re the professional spies, Wedge. You’re just a fighter-jock. Your job is to be here with your pilots.”

“Dammit, Tycho, you’re not going to change my mind. This is—”

Footsteps clattered down the hall. They both turned to see a furry Farghul in a colonel’s uniform turned the corner and walk down the hall, dragging a female with lieutenant’s stripes along. When they saw Wedge and Tycho they averted their eyes and tried to hide their giddy smiles. A door slid open and they both disappeared into the colonel’s quarters.

Wedge sighed and said, “Everyone has to have someone, Tycho. You may not have your family but you do have Winter. And I’m not even talking about romance. I just need someone, *something* outside this war. Something to remind me there’s more to life than getting in a cockpit and getting ready to die.”

He dropped his head low. Wedge looked tired then, and old, and lonely and beaten, all the things Tycho had thought he’d never see. He put both hands on his friend’s shoulders and said, “Let me do this.”

Wedge’s head snapped up. “No. I can’t let you.”

“I have way more hours inside a TIE than you. And I’ve flown through Coruscant airspace. You’ve never even *seen* it before.”

“I can’t let you do this, Tycho. This is about my sister. It’s my problem.”

“Wedge, even if you do go, and even if you *do* get Syal back, do you think Ackbar and Cracken will ever trust you again?”

“If I get my sister back I won’t care.”

“That’s a long shot, Wedge. I hate to say it but it’s true and you know it. At most we can hope to trace her last location, maybe figure out what ship she slipped out of the system on.”

“I know. I’m willing to take whatever I can get.”

“Wedge, *please*, you have to stay here. Let me fly that TIE for you.”

He jerked his shoulders free of Tycho's grip and started walking down the hall. Tycho watched as Wedge staggered past the door to his cabin and kept walking. He wanted to call after him but had no idea what to say.

Leia Organa had spent the past thirty minutes trying to patch in a direct connection to the *Millenium Falcon*, but apparently there was some sort of ion distortion mucking up all communications between *Home One*'s current location and Kashyyyk, so after getting herself well and truly frustrated she finally just gave up trying.

She'd wanted to talk to Han about the Corporate Sector, of course, but just as much she'd wanted to talk to *Han*. She hadn't seen him since Milagro and she found she missed him more than she wanted to admit to herself and definitely would *never* admit to him.

Feeling suitably frustrated, she resolved to go back to her cabin and help herself to a little of that spring wine Mon Mothma had gifted her after she'd accepted the job of accompanying Borsk Fey'lya to the Corporate Sector. She'd said it was to sooth the nerves, probably a reference to Fey'lya, but her nerves needed their share of soothing right now too.

She summoned the lift that would take her up to *Home One*'s habitation deck. As she waited she could hear the hum of the lift capsule's approaching. It was normally a dull, almost soothing noise, but this time she heard an awful banging sound, faint at first, but louder as the lift pulled to a stop.

The door hissed open and, standing in the middle of the lift capsule, was Wedge Antilles, face red, brown hair a disheveled mess, one foot lifted high to add another smeared boot-mark to the dozen already kicked into the wall of the lift.

"Wedge!" she gasped. "What happened?"

At the sound of her voice he lost balance and nearly fell into the wall. Leia rushed into the lift and helped straighten him up.

"I'm all right, Princess," Wedge said. He tried to pull away from her but the doors on the lift slid shut and there was nowhere to go.

"Come on, Wedge, we'll go to my quarters." She stabbed a button and the lift whirled to motion.

"I'm *fine*, Princess. Really."

"You're not fine." She clasped his arm hard. "Come on. I was going to pop open some Chandrilan spring wine and I think you could use some too."

He protested, but only a little. Leia spent a lot of time moving around, and she'd put no personal touches on her cabin on *Home One*. She did, though, have the wine, and she poured one glass for herself and one for Wedge. The pilot collapsed on her sofa and belatedly tried to claw his hair back out of his face. In all the years she'd known him, Wedge had always been unflappable. She could think of only one thing that might have changed that.

She sat in the chair across from him and asked cautiously, "Is it about your sister, Wedge?"

He took a sip of wine and nodded.

"Oh, Wedge, I'm so sorry."

"She's not dead," he sniffed. "Or maybe she is. I don't know. I don't know, Leia. Cracken's people, they had her. In a safehouse, on Coruscant. But then the ISB came, killed Cracken's people, but Cracken's people killed *them*..." He shook his head, messing up his hair again. "Nobody knows where she is. So maybe she *is* dead, I don't know. Maybe Isard has her."

"What are they going to do about it?"

His eyes met hers and went hard. "I'm going to Coruscant. Ackbar has a TIE fighter designed to take sensor sweeps. There's this... tracker. They think we can find Syal that way, or at least get a clue as to where she's headed."

"Wedge, did you say *you're* going to fly that TIE?"

He took another sip of wine and nodded. "If you want it done right, do it yourself. I can't trust anyone else."

"Wedge, you can trust Cracken and Ackbar--"

He jerked his head from side to side. "I trusted them enough. They had six months to find my sister. All they managed to do was lose her." He took another sip and added, "If you think *I'm* angry, try talking to Fel."

Leia wasn't sure what to say. The idea of leaving Rogue Squadron and flying off on a personal mission was so unlike

the Wedge she'd known; but then, the stakes had never been personal before. The fact that he'd had no family, no wife, no outside attachments had been part of what had made Wedge Antilles the good soldier he was.

But family changed a lot of things. Leia knew that now.

Maybe Wedge thought the same thing. He asked, "What was it like, finding out Luke was your brother? After all that time, finding out you had a family again?"

"It's hard to describe... After my father- after Bail- died, it took me a long to accept that. But when I lost my father I got Luke and Han and Chewie at the same time. I had no idea Luke was my brother, but when he told me on Endor... It was so incredible, but it made sense. It couldn't *not* believe it. If anything, it seemed strange that we could have gone so long without realizing something so obvious."

"I haven't seen Syal since I was a kid," Wedge sighed. "Weeks would go by without me even thinking of her. I told myself I had no family and I believed it. Right until I stepped into that interrogation room with Fel. And I had no idea she'd become a holo-star either. All our recordings of her burned up with Gus Treta Station. I could barely remember what she looked like. I'd seen a few Starflare dramas and I remembered thinking she seemed weirdly familiar somehow, but I never dwelled on it.

"Then I talked to Fel, and I went back and popped in one of her shows and I thought, *This is my sister*. And I could see a little bit of the Syal I remembered there. And I couldn't not-believe it either." Wedge shook his head. "Where *is* Luke, anyway? Is he on board?"

"He was. He just left for Ruusan." She leaned forward. "Inquisitor Jerec is dead. One of Luke's friends killed him. There's some Jedi ruins there and he took Artoo and Threepio with him, to see if they can help him make sense of it all."

Wedge started blankly down at his glass. The news that one of the Empire's most dreaded warlords was dead passed over him completely.

Abruptly he said, "Tycho wants to fly that TIE."

She blinked. "You mean to Coruscant?"

Wedge bobbed his head. "I can't let him do it, though. This is my problem. I have to take responsibility. I can't leave it to other people to keep Syal safe, not any more."

"Did he really offer that, to go to Coruscant and look for your sister?"

Wedge nodded. She put her glass down, reached out, and grasped his wrist. "I think you should let him."

Wedge blinked and met her eyes. "Why?"

"Wedge, any mission to Coruscant is going to be very dangerous. Whoever goes might not come back."

"I'm prepared for that."

"Wedge, we need you. Tycho is a great pilot, and my friend, but—"

"But what? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Leia gave a little sigh. He'd have to find out sooner or later. "I'm leaving on a mission soon. Winter's coming with me. We're going to the Corporate Sector."

"The Corporate Sector?" he frowned.

"We're looking to negotiate an alliance with them and purchase their resources. Councilor Fey'lya and I are both going to Etti IV. If something *does* go through... Well, it could change a lot of things. It might spark something with the Empire or even Zsinj. We might have to fight to secure the Corporate Sector. And that's assuming the negotiations go right. If they don't... Well, I'd feel a lot better knowing you were ready to fly to my rescue, Wedge."

"Leia, don't make me chose between my sister and you. You'll lose. I'm sorry, but you will."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm saying the *Republic* needs you."

He ran both hands across his face and though his hair, messing it up again. "Leia, this isn't fair."

"I know. And I'm sorry too. But we can't risk losing you, not now. There's so much at stake."

"If Luke were the one missing, what would you do? Would you still go to Etti IV or would you go rescue him?"

It was a question Leia had asked herself plenty of times. She still didn't have a good answer. "I don't know. But I do know that no matter, I'd end up relying on my friends. Han,

Chewie, Lando. You, Tycho, Winter. We're all in this together, Wedge. No matter what we end up choosing to do."

Wedge stared down at his boots and said nothing. When Leia released his arm he stood up, leaving his half-finished glass on the floor, walked to the door, and stepped through. Leia stayed where she was and didn't even think to follow.

Once they explained their plan to Willham Burke, the admiral screwed up his face into a deep scowl, looked down at his boots, looked back up at Drayson and Dey'rylan, and told them, "It won't be enough."

"*What* won't be enough?" asked the Bothan. He was leaning against the side of Drayson's desk; the admiral was behind it and Burke stood in the middle of the room.

"There's too many variables," Burke shook his head. "First of all, there's no way to know that Makati will go to Bonodan in the first place."

"She'll send someone," Drayson said, "When she found out Pestage was meeting with Councilor Organa at Axxila, she sent Krennel. This time she'll want to make sure she sends somebody she can actually *trust*. When you consider his past role as official advisor to the Direx--"

"Makati is the obvious choice, I'll grant that," Burke said with a small sigh. "Objection number two: How can you be sure you'll get a shot at him?"

He directed that one to Dey'rylan. The Bothan said, "We have to *make* sure. How about this: I get attached to Fey'lya's diplomatic team as an aide. All I need to do is listen into a couple conversations there and I'll learn more about CSA internal politics- who can be trusted, who can be used- than I'd get in a dozen intel reports. Meanwhile, the rest of my team inserts on Bonadan, does a thorough recce, and comes up with multiple plans to get to Makati."

"How many do you have?" asked Burke. "Six?"

"Including me, five. We lost one at Tralus."

"Ah." Burke eyed him carefully. "This mission could be very risky. Are you prepared for that?"

Dey'rylan didn't flinch. "Everything I know, sir, I learned from Koth Melan and his people. They all died getting the Death Star plans."

"Melan and his team are martyrs for the whole Republic now. If you die going after Makati, no one will ever know. A mission like this is too secretive to be made public, even if it succeeds."

"Nobody becomes a spy because they want to get famous. I want to win this war and beat the Empire, and right now we can't do that with Makati alive. And, no offense intended sir, but I think we have a better chance to kill him like this than on a battlefield."

The admiral nodded curtly, but Dey'rylan knew how to read human faces and he knew the defeat at Bandomeer still grated on Burke. Frankly, he'd been counting on that.

"You talk like you want to avoid a battle," the admiral said, "But you took a risk and brought me in on this. Why do you want my fleet there if you don't want to fight?"

"We want to avoid being caught like we were at Ciutric," Drayson said. "There's a tiny chance that Makati finds out where Organa and Fey'lya *really* are, and that means we have to be ready. And *that* means we have to justify holding back a major task force to Ackbar."

"You're an admiral too, Hiram. Why not go to him yourself?"

"Because it will mean more coming from you. You're an active fleet officer. Insist you want to keep part of the Third stationed close to the Corporate Sector- say, at Quermia- in case the Councilors need an emergency evac. You won't even have to lie."

Burke sighed. "I can probably convince Ackbar to pull some ships, but there's no telling if we'll have enough for Makati."

"There's no reason for him to bring a full fleet just to capture two councilors," Dey'rylan said. "I'd expect *Steadfast*, maybe a few support craft, but no more. Isard's forces are stretched thin too."

"Hiram, have you checked the latest from Ruusan?"

Drayson frowned and shook his head.

"It just came through two hours ago," Burke said. "The NRI reports that Inquisitor Jerec was killed on the planet."

Dey'rylan's jaw dropped open. Drayson said, "Are we sure about that?"

"One of Cracken's people killed Jerec himself. The High Inquisitor is dead."

It was great news, but none of them were smiling. Dey'rylan asked, "What happened to his flagship, *Vengeance*?"

"That's the question isn't it?" Drayson scowled. "All right. I'll do what I can to find that ship. If it *did* go back to Isard—"

He stopped. Dey'rylan said, "Even if it *did*, there's no guarantee Makati would take it all the way out to Bonadan. This doesn't change anything."

"But it *could*," Burke insisted. "I can probably convince Ackbar to let me station a task force at Quermia, but if Makati *does* bring *Vengeance* into the fray, we don't have anything that can stand against it."

"We can't call off this mission because of *maybes*," Dey'rylan insisted.

"It's not just Ackbar. The bigger the fleet we bring to the edge of the Corporate Sector, the more likely it is that Isard's spies find out."

"Then we need more ships, from somebody else. Get ready to spring a surprise, like Makati did with those Mandos."

"From where?" asked Drayson. "I doubt those Viceprex the councilors are meeting with can summon any CSA ships, not without tipping off Makati."

The admiral sounded discouraged now, and that was the last thing Dey'rylan wanted. As long as he had Drayson with him he could force through any scheme, no matter how much of a long shot. It was the way they'd always done it before.

Inspiration sparked from desperation. He said, "What about Bel Iblis?"

Drayson and Burke froze, stared at him. Drayson's mustached face drooped into a scowl; the Chandrilan intel chief was a close ally of Mon Mothma and no big fan of the Corellian senator who'd broken from her to fight the Empire on his own terms. For a second Dey'rylan cursed himself for even bringing the idea up.

Then he saw Burke looking intrigued.

"Bel Iblis knows how to fight," the admiral said. "I used to be wing commander on his flagship, back when I still flew snubfighters. He was great at pulling off fast raids against

larger targets. He did that attack on Tangrene a few years ago with- how many ships was it?"

He looked at Drayson who, still scowling, supplied, "Six Rendilli dreadnaughts and an old Clone Wars destroyer, the *Fang Zar*."

"I know that ship. I can't remember how many sorties I flew off its deck. Does he still have her?"

"To the best of my knowledge."

"What was the last time he attacked an Imperial target?" asked Dey'rylan. If he had *Burke* on his side, he just might be able to pry Drayson over too.

"They made a raid on Loronar three months ago. Destroyed a few strike cruisers in drydock. Haven't heard much from them since."

"Do you have any idea where he is now?" asked Burke, encouragingly keen.

Drayson shook his head. "We've never been able to locate his base and not for want of trying. Mon Mothma has always been... interested in his movements."

"I think I might know a way," said Dey'rylan.

Drayson frowned. "How?"

Dey'rylan's fur rippled. "I believe Councilor Fey'lya has had certain... contacts with Bel Iblis over the years."

"Fey'lya? And how did *you* know that?"

"Consider it a Bothan secret. If anyone knows how to contact Bel Iblis, it will be Fey'lya's people."

"So what do you plan to do, go and *ask* them politely to help set up a trap using their councilor as bait?"

"There may be another way," Burke said. He was really getting into it now. "If we insert you into Fey'lya's diplomatic staff for the mission to Etti IV, that will give you access to all kinds of information."

"Bothans didn't get a reputation as master spies by being sloppy," Drayson sniffed.

"We definitely didn't, but there *are* other options," Dey'rylan said. "For example, they might not let *me*, a newcomer, get access to their special data, but I know Fey'lya has a protocol droid he takes with him on diplomatic missions. He's had it for years. It comes and goes and nobody bats an eye."

“What can a droid tell you?”

“The droid can tell me a lot if I modify it to retrieve data from Fey’lya’s personal files that satisfy certain search criteria.”

“You can slice a droid and rewrite its programming?” asked Burke, skeptical.

“I can slice anything.” Dey’rylan kept his eyes on Drayson. “Sir, if we’re going to act we have to act *now*. Get me on Fey’lya’s staff. Get me ten minutes alone with his protocol droid and I can swing a meeting with Bel Iblis’s people on Etti IV.”

“There’s no reason to think Bel Iblis would even help,” Drayson snorted. “He’s shown absolutely no sign of wanting to aid the Rebel Alliance. He still thinks Mon Mothma is going to swap her white robes for black ones and declare herself Empress,”

“This can be a peace offering, especially if he knows I’m willing to co-op,” Burke insisted. “This can start healing the rift between the two of them.”

Drayson sighed and shook his head. “I never thought you’d end up the one who has to convince *me*, Willham.”

“I think this is worth the effort, and the risk. I really do,” Burke said, but when he spotted the eager light in Dey’rylan’s eyes he added, “Someone has to say this, so I will. We are talking about spying on members of the Provisional Council, stealing from them, and using them as bait for the Empire. This skirts dangerously close to treason.”

“What we’re doing is for the good of the entire New Republic,” Dey’rylan insisted. “If we kill Makati, we can turn the tide of this war.”

“She’ll still have Grant,” Drayson reminded him.

“Then we’ll kill him next.” Dey’rylan bore his fangs in a predator’s smile. “Alpha Black’s already scored four grand admirals and if this works we’ll get another. With five down, how hard can one more be?”

Drayson sighed again, looked at Burke, then back at Dey’rylan. Then he said, “All right, Reyan. By this time tomorrow you’ll be Borsk Fey’lya’s newest diplomatic aide. Draw up a plan for inserting the rest of your people on Bonadan.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

It was nighttime again aboard *Home One*, and the lights were low in the flagship’s auxiliary hangar. The deck was empty of movement except for a few maintenance droids making rounds. A bulky modified Corellian freighter took up most of the deck, though its aft hatch was open to reveal the modified TIE fighter that had been placed inside its cargo section.

Wedge sat on a workman’s bench, staring at that freighter and its cargo, wondering if it was really the way he would get his sister back. He’d spent most of his life resigning himself to the fact that his entire family was gone; even when Fel stumbled into his life he couldn’t bring himself to truly *believe* that he would ever see his sister again; that he would ever have a life beyond the next campaign, the next dogfight.

He still couldn’t believe it.

He’d been sitting there for close to an hour, staring at the ship, feeling more exhausted than angry, when he heard a gravelly voice say behind him, “I thought I would find you here.”

He was too tired to even leap up in surprise. Besides, that voice was hard to mistake. He turned around and saw Admiral Ackbar looking down at him, the Mon Cal’s bulbous eyes faintly shining in the low light.

“Admiral,” he said simply. Their last conversation had ended badly. In fact, far more badly than any other conversation he and Ackbar had ever had.

The Mon Cal seemed to pointedly ignore Wedge’s awkwardness by sitting on the bench beside him. He placed his webbed hands on the white knees of his trousers. “Have you made your decision?”

“What decision?”

“Princess Leia tells me that Captain Celchu has offered to fly this ship on your behalf.”

“Princess Leia has a big mouth, apparently.”

“I thought it was brave of him to do so. Your friend cares for you very much.”

Wedge sighed. “I know. But Admiral, I can’t just sit aside and not do anything to help Syal. Not any more.”

"Did Princess Leia tell you about her new mission?"

"Yes," Wedge admitted. "She said she might need help."

"Indeed. I've just spoken with Admiral Burke. He'll be taking a division to Quermia, in case we need to take immediate action in the Corporate Sector. His flag will be aboard the *Emancipator* again. He requests that Rogue Squadron join him."

Wedge leaned forward and dropped his face in his hands. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept soundly. He knew he wouldn't do it tonight.

Calmly, Ackbar said, "I've been reminded over the past few days that we are no longer a band of disorganized rebels. We are a government, and we must conduct ourselves like one. That means we all have our responsibilities, our places, our roles to fill, even if we don't like them."

"Admiral, I've never made this kind of personal request. You know that."

"I know. And I appreciate the severity of your circumstances. But the New Republic is filled with beings, and all have their own personal dramas. If every one of them threatened to resign if he did not get his way, what kind of government would we be?"

Wedge looked at the TIE fighter half-cloaked in darkness of the freighter's hold. "It's a lot easier to be a good soldier when soldiering is all you do."

"Indeed. Commander, when I agreed to let you go to Coruscant and look for your sister, I was bowing to a threat."

Wedge could have said he was sorry, but he wasn't. "You're saying this will affect my career. Fine. I never wanted a promotion. I never wanted to fly a desk."

"You should also understand that whatever affect this choice has on your career will also affect the other Rogues."

He scowled. "Admiral, that's not fair."

"It is entirely fair. You are their commanding officer. More than that, you have personally hand-picked every member of this squadron and made this unit in your image. You reflect on them as they reflect on you. If you shirk your duty as Rogue Leader you shirk all your pilots, personally."

"This isn't about them."

"It *is*, Commander, just like every decision I make, or Admiral Burke makes, is about every soldier under our command. If you don't understand that, perhaps it was a mistake to give you your current position at all."

"You're saying I should let Tycho fly." He balled his hands into fists.

"I am saying you must choose between your sister and Rogue Squadron. I'm sorry, Wedge, but I cannot make allowances, not even for a friend."

The bench creaked a little as Ackbar stood up. Wedge stared down at his fists as the admiral started to walk away.

"All right," he croaked. The footsteps stopped. Wedge didn't look up. "I'll let Tycho fly. I'll go with the Rogues to Quermia."

There was a long silence. Wedge was starting to think that he was going mad, that he hadn't even spoken, when Ackbar said softly, "Do you wish to inform Captain Celchu, or should I?"

"I'll do it," Wedge said.

There was another pause; then Ackbar started to walk away. Wedge listened to his footsteps until they dwindled to nothing. Then he picked up his head and looked around the dark hangar. The whole ship seemed asleep.

Tycho was surely with Winter now. Wedge would tell him in the morning. It was the last chance his friend would have to escape this war for a long time.

Tycho sat on his bed, staring at the black helmet he held in his black-gloved hands. It had been so long since he'd worn the jumpsuit of a TIE fighter pilot and put on that suffocating helmet.

He hadn't missed them at all.

He looked up. Winter was standing over him. Her head was tilted so white hair fell across her face. It had been as short as his own when they'd met a year ago. He liked it better long, but right now it veiled her eyes and hid half her face from view.

"Two weeks, in and out," he said.

"I know. But that's only if things go according to plan."

"How long are you and Leia supposed to be on Etti IV?"

She thought a moment. "To get there and back again? About two weeks."

Tycho gave a brittle smile. "Want to bet on who gets back to *Home One* first?"

"I've never been a big gambler."

"Of course you are. Everyone who joined the Rebel Alliance was. We fought the Emperor and won. Who'd have bet on that? Compared to what we've done already, this is nothing."

That didn't seem to cheer her. Tycho rose to his feet. He dropped his helmet on the bed and wrapped his arms around Winter's shoulders, pressing her against the bulky material of his pilot's jumpsuit. He could feel barely any of her body and none of her warmth. A black-gloved hand pushed white hair out of her face so he could kiss her.

She put her arms around him, finally, and hugged him tight. He whispered in her ear, "I have to do this. For Wedge."

"I know," she said, so softly he could barely hear. "You're too good a friend, Tycho."

She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice. He kissed her once more, quickly on the mouth, then pulled away. Winter stayed where she was, looking down at the deck, hugging herself tightly as though chilled.

"I'll be back soon," he said as he picked up his helmet. She only nodded.

He knew if he lingered any longer with her he wouldn't leave. He tucked his helmet under his arm and walked through the door.

He took one step into the corridor and stopped in his tracks. Soontir Fel was standing there, hands awkwardly clasped behind his back.

"Captain," he said with the tiniest nod. "I'll walk you to the hangar."

Tycho nodded. They went in silence down the halls and to the lift. As they rode down to the auxiliary hangar Fel said, "Words can't express how much I appreciate this. If they'd let me take your place—"

"I know," Tycho said. "You don't have to say it."

It felt strange, being here at this moment, with this man. In another lifetime Fel had been a martinet intimidating teacher.

Later he'd become a mortal enemy. He still didn't know what Fel was now: not a friend, but a comrade, a partner. A man on his wing.

As the lift door opened and they resumed walking toward the hangar he asked, "Will you go with Wedge and the other Rogues to Quermia?"

"I will."

"I'm glad. They'll need you flying with them, especially now that they're down to eight pilots."

"For now."

"Of course. For now."

Before they got to the doorway Fel stopped and extended a hand. Tycho stared at it, knowing he should take it and shake, but he felt afraid to grasp it.

"I'm in your debt forever," Fel said.

Tycho shook his head and grabbed the hand in front of him. "You don't owe me anything."

Fel squeezed hard, then released it. Together they walked into the hangar. Tycho was shocked to find the other Rogue arrayed on either side of the pathway leading to the freighter. Wedge surely hadn't told them all exactly why he was going to Coruscant, but it didn't matter. Feylis and Avan stood to his right, hands raised in salutes. To his left, Xarce held her fist over her heart in a Tunroth sign of respect. Fel and Tycho walked past them to Nrin, who shook Tycho's hand. Hobbie and Janson gave him warm pats on the back.

And, finally, there was Wedge. They stood facing each other awkwardly for a moment before falling into a hug. Wedge pounded him twice between the shoulder-blades and said, "Thank you so much, Tycho."

Tycho pulled away and patted his shoulders. There was so much gratitude, so much *need* in his friend's face he didn't have anything to say.

He stepped back from Wedge and turned to face the other Rogues. He put on his best grin and said, "Don't get all mopey, you hear? Two weeks from now, your XO's going to back and he's going to be riding all your butts."

"Wouldn't have it any other way, sir," Feylis called.

"Fly straight and true," Nrin added gravely.

"I intend to," Tycho said.

He cocked a lazy salute, then turned and marched toward the freighter and its TIE fighter, hoping he projected more confidence than he felt.

Devin Torr and his compatriots were impressively elusive, but after Tycho Celchu flew off to Coruscant, Soontir Fel spent the next three hours tracking them down. He eventually found Torr and his Em'liy compatriot in the same fitness center he and Wedge had retreated to just a few nights before.

Torr was clambering beneath a lift press while the big Em'liy was hitting a punching bag so hard Fel was afraid it would tear open. He sidestepped the Em'liy and stood above Torr as he lay on the bench with his arms poised to start pushing the weight bar.

"Are you here to spot me?" the man said as Fel's shadow fell over his face.

"I'd like a minute."

"A minute-minute or a 'minute'?"

"I'll be brief."

"Okay, then." Torr crawled out from beneath the bar and rolled onto his feet. The Em'liy kept on tearing at the punching bag and didn't seem to notice as they walked to a private corner of the room.

"Something must be important." Torr said as he wiped sweat off his brow with his forearm.

"You're a difficult man to find."

"Thank you."

"That's what I wanted to say. Thank you."

Torr planted his hands on his lips. "Drayson hasn't come yelling at me for spilling secrets, and that means they haven't figured out where you got the Boudolayz report. I guess I should thank you for keeping me out of it."

"They've had more pressing concerns. Thankfully, they're finally taking action. I hope it will be enough."

"I'm glad. Honestly. Is that why you Rogues had that send-off ceremony in the auxiliary hangar this morning?"

Fel stared. Torr shrugged. "I'm a spook. I hear things."

"Captain Celchu is flying to Coruscant in a modified TIE fighter. He'll be flying scouting missions over Imperial City in the hope of finding a trail."

“With an isotopic tracker. I know how it works,” Torr nodded. “Of course, with a place like Coruscant, you’d pretty much need to be airborne to search. Do you really think she’s still there?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. But frankly, this is the only thing we’ve got. We have to try.”

“I understand. I hope you get your family back together.”

“Thank you. For that, and everything.”

Fel held out a hand. Torr waved a sweaty palm and chuckled. “Gratitude accepted. I also heard the Rogues will be shipping out to Quermia with Admiral Burke. That include you?”

“It does.”

“How about that. We’re shipping out soon too.” He threw a thumb at the Em’liy behind them. “Sho-Tev, he wanted to get one last workout.”

He was indeed getting that. “I suppose that means we’ll never see each other again.”

Torr shrugged. “I think I might be heading to the same neighborhood, so you never know.”

Fel frowned a question, but Torr shook his head and raised one hand in a slack salute. “Whatever happens, I guess I should wish you good hunting.”

Fel returned the motion more crisply. “Good hunting to you too, and all your people.”

Torr chuckled and let his hand fall to his side. “Believe me, for all our sakes, you’d better hope so.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BILBRINGI

When Director Isard informed Octavian Grant that she wanted his escort to Bilbringi, without prelude or warning, the grand admiral's first reaction was honest confusion: the regent almost never left her lair under Imperial Palace. His second reaction was frustration: she'd tasked him with planning the conquest of the Ciutric Hegemony, only to pull him away from his assigned task. That, in turn, led to disappointment and foreboding. Whatever she wanted him for at Bilbringi, it likely had nothing to do with him.

As *Oriflamme* prepared to revert to realspace over the Empire's largest Mid-Rim shipyards facility, he tried to console himself that the presence of the regent on his command deck, not to mention a pair of silent, crimson-robed guardsmen shadowing her, left the entire bridge crew speechless in awe.

When Captain Bremel announced that they'd arrived at their destination, Isard sidled close to Grant said in a husky whisper, "Things are finally about to change for us, Octavian."

He pursed his lips for a question. Then Bilbringi and its orbital shipyards burst into view, and there wasn't anything left to say. Even from outer orbit, the long black silhouette of the super star destroyer *Vengeance* was unmistakable against the crescent of the planet's face.

The sight of a such a mighty warship should have filled Grant with a sense of triumph; instead he felt crushing disappointment. Somehow, so quickly and easily that Grant

had no idea it had happened, Makati had done what he could not and claimed a super star destroyer for Isard.

"Does this mean," he asked, "That Inquisitor Jerec is dead?"

Isard smirked. "He is indeed."

Well, at least there was *something* to feel good about.

Grant joined Isard and her crimson guards on the regent's personal shuttle when they set out for *Vengeance*. Though physically smaller than Kaine's *Reaper*, the black metal of the warship's hull made it just as intimidating.

When they landed in its vast main hangar, the first one to greet them was Grand Admiral Makati, saluting smartly and looking not nearly as smug as he deserved to.

"Welcome aboard, Director Isard," Makati said, then glanced sideways at Grant and added, "Grand Admiral."

"Congratulations on your accomplishment, Afsheen," Isard said with a tight smile on her face. "At ease. How goes the repairs?"

Makati lowered his arm. "They are underway, Madam Director. I'm hoping to have this ship at fully optimal performance after two weeks. Given this ship's non-standard pedigree, we've had some difficulty with replacement parts, but the technicians here assure me they'll do their best to match its initial specifications."

"I'm glad to hear it. Tell me, is a meeting place prepared?"

"Right this way, Director," Makati said, though instead of turning to lead them away he gestured to a man in a trim gray captain's uniform who'd been standing behind him. "This is Captain Sysco, commanding officer of the *Vengeance*."

The man immediately dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "This vessel is yours to do with as you please, Madam Director, as it should have been all along."

Isard looked down on him, amused. "I understand you surrendered this ship immediately upon request."

Without lifting his head, Sysco said, "Yes, Madam. It was a grievous mistake to have ever taken Inquisitor Jerec's orders in the first place. I know that, as captain, I must take responsibility for my errors, but I beg mercy on behalf of my crew. If you can find forgiveness in your heart for their transgressions, they will serve you as best as they are able."

Contrition was one thing, but in Grant's opinion he was overdoing it a little. Isard, though, still had that amused smile on her face." You may stand, Captain."

Sysco rose to his feet and made an admirable effort at looking Isard in the eye. She said, "After the slaughter at Tralus, I offered a general amnesty to all Imperial officers who swore off their allegiance to Grunger and Pitta. I'm willing to do the same to you."

"Madam, does that mean that I may, ah, retain command of my vessel?"

"For the moment, yes. Given this ship's unique pedigree, as the grand admiral said, we'll need someone intimately familiar with her systems to oversee repairs."

"I won't disappoint you, Madam Director."

"I should hope not." She turned her eyes to Makati. "Now please, let's continue this conversation in private."

They left Sysco standing breathlessly relieved in the hangar. Two white stormtroopers took the lead and two crimson guardsmen trailed behind while Isard, Grant, and Makati made their way through *Vengeance's* corridors.

"I have to say I'm dying to know," Grant told Makati, "How *did* you kill Jerec?"

"That's a complicated issue. By the time I arrived at Ruusan, Jerec was already dead and Captain Sysco was waiting to surrender."

"Did his crew mutiny?"

"Nothing of the sort," Isard said. "It seems Jerec was killed by Rebel agents on the planet's surface."

"*Rebels*?" Grant frowned. "Are you sure?"

"My spies in their fleet confirmed it. They're celebrating right now, in fact."

"Well. I suppose that means they're useful for something after all. What about the damage this ship took? Was that them also?"

"No," Makati said. "That was someone else."

This whole situation kept getting more confused. "And who was *someone else*?"

Instead of answering. Makati stopped and entered his passcode for the room ahead of them. The panel beeped acceptance and the door slid open, looking out on a circular

conference chamber. On the far side of the table stood a blue-skinned humanoid with glowing red eyes, dressed in the white uniform and gold epaulets of an Imperial grand admiral.

Grant drew in breath as he followed Isard and Makati inside. The door slid shut behind them; not even the crimson guards followed.

“Greetings, Admiral Thrawn,” he managed to say. “It’s been quite some time.”

The last time Grant had seen the alien was on Imperial Center during his elevation to grand admiral, a small but auspicious gathering at which, he remembered now, Makati and Isard had also been present. So, too, had Palpatine and Darth Vader, plus Takel, Teshik, Syn, and Grunger. Pitta and Il-Raz had protested disgust at seeing a subhuman elevated to their rank and refused to come; Grant had hardly been pleased either, but he’d known better than to show it before the Emperor and court his ill will.

The only ones from that ceremony left alive were standing in this room. Grant suppressed a shudder as Makati explained, “The grand admiral and I worked together to cripple Jerec’s flagship with a series of surgical strikes. Not a single loyal Imperial was killed.”

“And how did you manage that?” Grant asked.

“Through very selective use of Shadow Squadron,” Isard said. “The cloaked TIEs proved... very effective.”

There was a certain, surprising iciness to her tone. Grant had a feeling Isard hadn’t specifically authorized the use of the TIE Phantoms, which in turn meant that Makati and Thrawn had been communicating behind her back. They may have even coordinated planning the Battle of Bandomeer, the attack on Scardia station, or other battles.

And Grant, for all he prided himself on his network of contacts and informants, hadn’t had a clue.

He fixed his gaze on the alien admiral. “Tell me, for how long have you been in known space?”

“I only returned recently,” Thrawn said in that very smooth tone of his. Despite being raised to adulthood by a bunch of xenophobic aliens in the Unknown Regions, he spoke Basic with the patrician crispness of a Coruscanti aristocrat.

“And have you made your... return to Imperial space?”

“This is a temporary excursion. As per the Emperor’s orders, I am still securing our flank in the Unknown Regions.”

Grant felt some relief at that, but not enough. He felt simultaneously ashamed and insulted that all of this had happened behind his back; Isard was right to have looked down on him as a fool when she had Thrawn and Makati both running who-knew-what special missions for her.

Grant was honest enough to admit that he was jealous of Thrawn. Far more clever than most aliens, his tactical abilities had earned him his white uniform. Nonetheless, he was still an outsider mimicking Imperial customs and behaviors, even Imperial accents. He was no more trustworthy than Zaarin or Grunger, but for his fighting skills, Palpatine and now Isard had overlooked that.

He’d known all along that Thrawn’s supposed exile to the Unknown Regions had been a cover arranged by Palpatine. He knew that Thrawn had created his own little kingdom out there in uncharted space, developing new weapons and making alliances with other alien domains, which was why Palpatine had entrusted him with killing the treasonous Zaarin, no matter how much Grant had begged to be put on the hunt himself.

Grant froze. Isard was not foolish enough to trust Thrawn, and he was not naive enough to trust her, but they’d both agreed to use each other. They’d done it to get *Vengeance*.

They could very well be doing it to get Wynssa Starflare.

Everything made sense that way: the agents who were not ISB and could travel through Zsinj’s space without fear, the abbreviated reports to Isard that hid as much as they told.

Thrawn was helping Isard capture Wynssa Starflare, and Isard was helping Thrawn snare Baron Fel.

“Admiral?” Makati said. “Admiral Grant, are you all right?”

He blinked, looked around, and saw all three of them staring at him.

“I’m quite fine,” he lied. “I’m sorry, was there a question?”

“A statement, actually,” Isard said. “Grand Admiral Thrawn will be returning to his ship shortly. He has a further

mission to complete. Grand Admiral Grant, your Ciutric campaign is placed under a delay.”

“Delay? Until repairs are finished on *Vengeance*?”

“At least until then. Perhaps later.”

His hopes fell. It was happening again: Isard, Makati, and Thrawn had hatched another plan behind his back and were leaving him to watch pathetically from the sides. He could almost forgive being sidelined in favor of Makati- the man was ten years younger, from a good family, and a fine tactician- but to be tossed aside in favor of an outsider, an *alien*, was too much.

He sucked in a breath and asked, “And what *am* I to do, Madam?”

“We’ll be returning to Coruscant soon,” she said. “I’ll need you to draw up a plan recommending fleet reorganization, to be enacted once we’ve fully repairs all the warships we’ve gained at Ruusan and Tralus.”

A *desk* job. Trying very hard to restrain his indignation, Grant asked, “And what of Grand Admiral Makati?”

“He is to be sent to the Corporate Sector.”

“The Corporate Sector?” Grant glanced at the other man; from the expression on Makati’s face, it was as much a surprise to him.

Isard nodded. “My spies within the Rebel fleet have given me credible evidence that two members of their Provisional Council will be meeting with senior administrators of the CSA to discuss an alliance.”

“The Corporate Sector? Sell to the Rebels? They wouldn’t dare,” said Makati.

“Apparently they are, because Borsk Fey’lya and Princess Leia Organa will be on Bonadan in six days.”

“Fey’lya and Organa,” Thrawn said. “Are you certain?”

Isard nodded. “That is why I’m sending Afsheen to Bonadan immediately. Prepare *Steadfast* and her support vessels and leave as soon as you can.”

“I suppose it *is* possible,” Makati blew a frustrated sigh. “Madam, I’m sure ExO Leon is loyal.”

“I’m sure he is. But *someone* is negotiating with the Rebels. I want Fey’lya and Organa captured. Is that clear?”

“Absolutely,” Makati said grimly.

"Then I'm glad we understand each other." Isard looked to Grant. "Come, Octavian. I imagine you want a look at this warship as much as I do."

Right now, what Grant really wanted was to know every last secret Thrawn was keeping in that blue alien skull of his, but because he wasn't going to get that, at least not yet, he nodded stupidly and said, "Yes, Madam, very much."

"Then let's go. Admirals, we'll return shortly."

Makati watched as Isard and Grant left the briefing room, then turned back to Thrawn. The other grand admiral seemed as aloof and inscrutable as ever; there was no telling what was behind those alien eyes and there never would be.

Still, he owed the alien a debt, once again.

Almost conversationally, Thrawn asked, "Was the director upset about our use of TIE Phantoms?"

"Upset that we hadn't asked permission," Makati said, "But for a ship like this, that's a small price to pay. She understands that."

"I'm glad."

So was Makati, but he wondered how far Isard's forgiveness would really extend. The woman did not forget, and he was afraid that, by going behind her back in his communications with Thrawn, he might have damaged her trust in a way no military victories could ever repair.

"You seem troubled," Thrawn observed.

"I'm quite all right," Makati lied. To change the subject he asked, "What will you do now, Admiral, if I may ask?"

"I have one more task to complete."

Thrawn's face was stiff, his red eyes unreadable. It had always been Imperial doctrine that aliens were inferior, prone to violence and chaos, that they needed human leadership to protect them from themselves. Growing up during the Clone Wars, when Neimodians, Muuns, Geonosians, Skakoans, and other non-humans had banded together to form the separatist Confederacy, Makati had seen ample evidence of that.

Yet here was Grand Admiral Thrawn before him. The admiral was shaped like a human, and he did his best to mimic everything Imperial, right down to the accent, but he was still an alien with an alien mind. Old experience told

Makati he couldn't really be trusted, any more than you could trust a Neimodian or a Muun.

That would have been easier to swallow if he'd had anyone else in the galaxy he could trust.

"What were you doing all that time?" Makati asked softly. "Did Palpatine send you into the Unknown Regions for a... specific purpose?"

Thrawn turned those inscrutable eyes on him. The alien took a long moment before responding, "Our goal was to bring order to uncivilized swathes of space."

"All of the Empire needs order now," Makati said. It was almost a request.

"I'm well aware of that. I am doing my best to hold both parts of the galaxy together." Thrawn tilted his head, a thoughtful gesture, then said, "Please, I'd like you to provide me with a secure communications line to your flagship."

"You want to contact me aboard *Steadfast*?" Makati lowered his voice. "Privately?"

"It may be necessary."

Thrawn let that statement fall where it willed. Makati stared at that alien face, saw nothing he understood, and asked, "May I have a way to contact your ship?"

"That can be arranged."

Thrawn nodded once and Makati nodded back. He didn't know what it would mean, or what would come of it, but it felt like he'd taken the first step toward something important.

Their observation drone swung around *Vengeance's* bow and slowed to a halt. Standing inside the drone's transparisteel bubble, Grant could look out across nineteen kilometers of black durasteel superstructure, all the way to the recessed command deck that rose faintly silhouetted against the dim glow of the super star destroyer's engines.

She was a dark and beautiful ship, but plenty of explosive scar-marks pocked her hull in critical locations. As the drone swung Isard and Grant outside the hull to get a first-hand view of the damage, it became immediately clear that Thrawn and Makati had delivered a series of exceedingly surgical strikes against key weapon, defensive, and sensor

systems; not enough to cripple the giant warship by any means, but enough to cow her captain into surrender.

Standing close beside him, Isard asked, "In your opinion, Octavian, can this ship really be placed at full fighting stead in two weeks' time?"

"With the proper supervisor, and with all the resources and man-hours at Bilbringi? Yes, I think it's possible." When she gave no response he asked, "Do you expect *Vengeance* to be needed so soon?"

"Perhaps." Isard crossed his arms over his chest and drummed two fingers on the red sleeve of her uniform.

"Director... Do you believe Makati might have to subdue to Corporate Sector?"

"That depends how far negotiations between the CSA and the Rebels have gone. If we're going to discipline the traitors and reassert our authority, don't you think *Vengeance* would be a fine symbol?"

"I think you're quite right," Grant said. In truth, he'd never been a supporter of the super star destroyer program. Palpatine, Tarkin, Jerec, and Vader had loved to build giant weapons, each one bigger and darker and more intimidating than the next, but the old naval officer in Grant still preferred flexible fleets made of many smaller, more versatile ships.

Isard was clearly of the newer school, the one that saw *Vengeance* and her sisters as symbols first, actual tools of warfare second. Never mind that fact that all its major practitioners were dead while old school strategists like Grant, Makati, and Thrawn were still alive. If he were to regain Isard's good side, he'd at least have to pretend to be as seduced by this ship as she was.

He added a lusty tone to his voice and told her, "Once we get this vessel fully repaired, we need to make a demonstration. The Corporate Sector is too valuable, but a Rebel world, or one controlled by Zsinj? We can sterilize it. Make it clear to every anarchist and warlord that our Empire, the *real* Empire, can strike back."

Isard gave him a wicked smile. "Ah, you're getting assertive at last, Octavian. I'm glad."

"We can't reassert control over the entire galaxy by playing defensively. If we intimidate the warlords, we can

bring them back into the fold. Slowly, gradually. Once we have that done, we can exterminate the Rebels once and for all.”

Isard gave a little sigh as the observation drone began to swing them back on their pre-programmed course toward *Vengeance*’s port-side docking rings. “This isn’t the *only* super star destroyer out there, Octavian.”

“I know. I had a tour of *Reaper* not long ago.”

“Don’t forget *Iron Fist*, and *Guardian*, and *Intimidator* and all the other warships Harrsk has huddled in the Deep Core.”

“Well. I suppose it’s good you have three grand admirals loyal to you, Madam Director.”

She gave him a sidelong glance with her ice-blue eye. “Loyalty is a very precious thing, Octavian.”

“You have mine, Madam Director. I can’t promise for anyone else, but I can promise for me.”

She looked away, toward *Vengeance*’s hull as it whisked by. “I can tell you never spent much time in the Emperor’s court. You’re too transparent with your flattery, Octavian.” As his heart started to fall, she looked back and added, “I trust *actions*.”

“I only ask for the chance to prove myself.”

“Then come up with a way for us to use this warship, Octavian. That will be your chance.”

It was all he’d ever wanted, but it felt like a huge weight was being dumped on his shoulders. Yet he found he didn’t mind that; he looked back toward *Vengeance*’s sprawling hull and allowed himself an honest smile.

Captain Niriz were there on the flight deck to welcome Grand Admiral Thrawn as his shuttle returned to *Grey Wolf*. The star destroyer had been sitting for nearly a full standard day in empty space; Thrawn hadn’t explained to Niriz where he was going, and the captain didn’t expect an explanation on his return.

Niriz was, however, surprised to see two Noghri trailing behind Thrawn as the grand admiral disembarked from his shuttle. Six stormtroopers followed after that, the same six that Niriz had watched go into the shuttle a day before. Despite being placed under his best guards, two of the stout

gray aliens had somehow escaped surveillance and joined Thrawn on his excursion.

His consternation must have shown on his face; Thrawn asked, in a tone of gentle bemusement, "They're very good, aren't they, Captain?"

"Too good," Niriz grunted. "Should I discipline the security team who was supposed to be watching them?"

"Yes, but not too severely. The Noghri, too, were acting on my orders."

They began to walk for the exit, the Noghri trailing and the troopers behind them. Thrawn asked, "Have we received any word from the Hand of Judgment?"

"Nothing, sir. I'm getting concerned. They should have at least hit Corporate Sector space by now."

"Perhaps they are in the process of retrieving Starflare as we speak."

Niriz wasn't sure he felt so optimistic. "We can hope," he grunted.

"All great things are built on hope, Captain, including empires. Nonetheless, I believe we should set course for the Corporate Sector now. There's no telling when or if they'll need our help."

"Very good, sir. I'll put helm on it right away." He considered a moment, then asked, "Has there been any word from the Noghri infiltrator you sent down to Ruusan?"

Thrawn said nothing, and just when Niriz grew sure the admiral wouldn't answer, he said, "I have had one communication, confirming that he stowed away on a Rebel ship leaving Ruusan."

"I see. And where will he go now?"

Thrawn cast a look backwards, and the shrouded little beings walking in their wake. "He's a Noghri, Captain. I dare say he can go anywhere he chooses."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ETTI IV

When Leia Organa arrived at Viceprex Lanchenoor's estate on Etti IV, her first thought was that it was the most luxurious place she'd ever plotted treason in. The Viceprex owned nearly twenty square kilometers of land located on the planet's southern hemisphere, in a region that was pleasantly temperate this time of year. Most of that land consisted of slow-rolling hills covered in beautifully shimmering green-gold grasses, but at the center of the Viceprex's grounds was a living complex the size of a small town, complete with landing pads for large transports and hangars for small shuttles, multiple mansion-sized homes for each of the Viceprex's husbands, a stable for domesticated animals, two acre-sized swimming pools, and an arena big enough for thirty thousands beings. There was even a heavy-grade local energy shield generator and a series of defensive laser cannon emplacements in submerged wells scattered throughout the estate.

The Princess of Alderaan was not easily impressed but luxury, but she was impressed here.

Most of the negotiations took place atop the observation toward that stood at the center of the state. Its circular transparisteel walls looked out in all directions at the sprawling field and the ice-capped mountains in the far southern distance. The circular table at the center of the room was big enough to fit most of the negotiating staff. For the first day, Leia and Borsk Fey'lya sat together on one side the table, their support staff fanning out on either flank: to Leia's

right there was Winter and Iktotchi diplomat Mokka Falanthas, while to Fey'lya's left sat a pair of Bothans: Tresk Im'nel and Tav Brei'lya. Directly across from Leia was the shaggy, black-and-white furred ZeHethbra Prex, Zrey Go'thal, along with two aides and a trio of Viceprexes. For lack of room at the table, one more black-furred Bothan aide stood with Fey'lya's bronze-plated protocol droid near the entryway doors. Unlike Im'nel and Brei'lya, Leia hadn't met Reyan Dey'rylan before this mission, and she didn't envy him having to stand for a full day of diplomatic talk.

In a surprising act of deference, Fey'lya allowed Leia to begin the negotiations. Her first question was simple enough.

"I'd like to know what everyone wants from these negotiations," Leia said, looking directly ahead at Go'thal. "If we're clear about this now we can avoid confusion later on."

"Of course," the ZeHethbra nodded. "Would you like to begin?"

"Very much so." Leia folded her hands on the table in front of her. "The New Republic seeks to become the Corporate Sector's primary economic partner. Your raw resources and manufacturing capabilities would help us enormously. In exchange for that we are, of course, willing to pay for your goods, and provide you with protection against Zsinj, Teradoc, and Isard."

Now that the easy part was over, Leia decided to risk the hard part. "We would also like you to guarantee certain conditions. We don't want to infringe on your sovereignty any more than the Empire has, but we want to ensure that in dealing with the Corporate Sector Authority we're not violating our primary values."

The Viceprex sitting to Go'thal's right, a well-dressed and grey-haired human named Lankar Dright, asked, "What values may those be?"

Leia could sense Fey'lya tensing beside her and pointedly ignored him. "The New Republic is a firm believer that all sentients are treated equally under the law. We believe all sentients have a right to participate in the creation of the laws that govern them and that all governing institutions exist to serve the people."

"Those are admirable words, of course, but the Empire likes to speak of its own values." Dright counted off on his fingers. "They like law, order, stability, and of course respect for the structure of authority. They especially like invoking values when they want to increase how much they're taxing us or request extradition of our citizens."

Leia hadn't been expecting that kind of hostility, but Fey'lya went right in, saying, "We recognize that the CSA is not a governing organization in the sense that the New Republic is, and as the Princess said, we'd never think to violate your sovereignty. However, it is precisely because we are *not* the Empire, and must be seen as a better alternative, that we're making this request."

Malor'dacan, the green-skinned Twi'lek Viceprex of Production, said, "You haven't requested anything yet."

"As the Princess pointed out, we're just laying out goals for the sake of transparency."

"I'm sure we can negotiate these specifics later," Viceprex Riga Lanchenzoor, an elderly human woman and by all accounts Go'thal's biggest ally, said.

"Agreed," said Tresk Im'nel. Im'nel had already made a name for himself in diplomatic circles through his negotiations with Grand Moff Kaine, and Fey'lya leaned back to let the brown-furred Bothan speak. "For the sake of transparency, I'd also like to ask you all several questions."

"Please," Go'thal spread his hands.

"I understand that there are eight Executive Viceprexes administering the different departments of the CSA. Right now, I only see three. To be blunt, where are the others?"

Malor'dacan looked surprised and Lanchenzoor embarrassed, but Dright chuckled and said, "You make a very good point. I'll make one too: You don't *need* all eight of us here, agreeing to work with your government. The CSA is a practical organization, not an idealistic one. For the Media, Research, and Territorial Viceprexes, it doesn't matter who they're selling to. They're essentially apolitical."

"What of the Viceprex of Security?" asked Falanthas. "I understand Lyq Varn is in charge of your police, your justice system, *and* the defense fleet. *She* certainly sounds important. And essentially political."

Falanthas and Im'nel were both being more pointed than Leia would like, but this time it was Go'thal who said, "Lyq Varn owes her position to the ExO. If we got forward with this agreement, I will take steps to remove her from her position and replace her with someone more amenable to working with the Republic."

"Do you have someone in mind?" asked Im'nel.

"The Chief of Situational Enforcement has been an ally of mine for years."

They were getting into mucky political machinations too fast for Leia's liking. Thankfully Lanchenzoor asked, "Ambassador Im'nel, did you have another question?"

"I do." The Bothan paused, and took a sip of water from his glass, and asked, "I don't doubt that you have the authority to remake the CSA's administration, Prex. But as I understand it, ExO Leon can only be removed by a vote from the Direx. The Direx aren't administrators, they're representatives from some of the galaxy's biggest industrial firms. None of them are here either. How do you plan to get *them* on your side?"

Leia glanced sidelong at Fey'lya. The Bothan's furred face betrayed no agitation, and she had to wonder whether he hadn't tasked Im'nel to ask these hard questions.

"The Direx members are pragmatists too," Go'thal replied. "The issue lies in convincing them that the New Republic can be a better business partner to them than the Empire."

"You're asking us to appeal to their rational self-interest?" asked Leia.

"Essentially, yes, though, we can do most of the appeals for you," Lanchenzoor said. "I've already been talking quietly with a number of Direx members about this possibility. So have Lankar and Malor'dacan. The Direx is not made of stalwart Imperial loyalists, Councilor. No one in the CSA is."

Leia didn't doubt that; the tricky flipside, of course, was that there'd be no Republic loyalists either, not if everyone was moved by rational self-interest alone.

"This is something we can discuss in more detail as well," Fey'lya spoke up for the first time in a while. However, right now I'd like to backtrack slightly. I was hoping you'd talk

about what kind of financial arrangements you have with the Empire. I'd like to know the paradigm we're working with."

"Of course," said Lanchenzoor. "Since Finance is my department, I'll take the lead here..."

Negotiations continued for the rest of the afternoon, and it was only as the sun started to fall, crisp and pretty against the rolling grassy hills, that Leia and the others got a chance to free themselves from the negotiating table. Lanchenzoor had prepared a formal dinner in just an hour, but Leia wanted time to speak privately with Fey'lya beforehand. After the New Republic delegation rode the lift down to the base of the tower, Leia took the opportunity to grab the Bothan as he was going over something with his protocol droid.

"Borsk," she asked, "Can we speak privately for a moment?"

Fey'lya waved a paw, and the droid shuffled away after the three Bothan aides. "Of course. What is it, Princess?"

She lowered her voice and said, "I'll admit, that was well-played. The way you had Im'nel go on the offense, so you could act as a mediator."

"I'm glad you noticed. I'd have been disappointed in you if you hadn't."

"I noticed you only had him go on the offensive about some things."

"Ah. You wish to press them more about... ethical standards."

"I do. Frankly, Borsk, the way you talked today, it sounded like you wanted them to just make a few concessions for appearances' sake. We haven't talked anything about liberalizing the courts, reforming the Security Police, or monitoring local planetary governments."

Fey'lya blew breath through his nostrils in a Bothan sigh. "Something aesthetics are the place to start."

"That's just the surface."

"And sometimes if you pretend to be something, you start becoming it. Leia, I understand your position, I truly do. However, if we harp too strongly on that aspect they'll decide we're a threat to their sovereignty and back away."

"If the CSA won't fulfill their end of the bargain, maybe that's for the best."

Fey'lya sighed again. "I don't want to raise this issue tonight."

"I won't. I've been to diplomatic dinners before, Borsk. Tonight is about small-talk, polite jokes, and veiled insinuations."

"And good food, I hope." The Bothan's fur rippled. "Before we start demanding internal reforms, I at least want to have a good groundwork and make sure they know they're getting something good before they start giving up privileges. Will you at least grant me that, Princess? The easy part before the hard?"

She gave a sigh of her own and said, "All right. But these talks won't be complete unless we do the easy *and* hard parts."

"Of course. And when the time comes, I'll let you take lead on those parts of the negotiations."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"Princess, I never doubted it."

For their second night on Etti IV, the New Republic negotiating team was spared another formal meal. Reyan Dey'rylan was glad of that; he'd made his own dinner plans. Before slipping out of the quarters reserved for the visiting diplomats, the Bothan sliced into his room's comm system and transmitted the audio/visual record of the second day's meeting, recorded via Fey'lya's protocol droid, to Drayson. He'd done the same the day before, and he had no doubt the admiral was still analyzing that batch of data.

Once that was done, the Bothan changed into the simple jacket and trousers of a normal laborer and went down to meet his dinner-date.

Viceprex Lanchenzoor's estate was in some ways a self-contained city, but it still hosted its share of servants, techs, and other day-workers who were transported from the nearest town via shuttle in the morning and back again at night. Several shuttles ran in each direction per day, and Dey'rylan managed to grab the early-evening one into the settlement. It wasn't the biggest metropolitan complex on Etti IV, but it still all the accouterments of a modern city including a modest starport, high-rise hotel and apartment

blocks, and of course a pleasure district complete with cantinas and casinos.

When he stepped into the establishment called the Diamond Blue, Dey'rylan scanned the room carefully. There were no other Bothans in the room, but he did see a couple Duros, a Trianii, two Sarkans, and a whole long table packed with small furry buck-toothed Tynnans. And, of course, lots of hairless flat-faced beady-eyed humans, just like you'd see in every other major port in the galaxy. It was a place where he wouldn't stand out, just like his dinner-date had promised.

He stepped up to the bar and ordered a drink. Paranoia came with the life he led, so he watched the bartender the whole time to make sure he got what he ordered and nothing extra. He stayed at the bar, back against the counter, sipping his drink as he scanned the room again as casually as possible.

She was sitting alone at a table, head tilted down but eyes raised up to meet his across the room. Dey'rylan walked a casual loop around the table full of Tynnans before he put his mug down in front of the woman and asked, "Can I have a seat, Miss, or are you waiting for someone?"

"I was waiting for a friend." She tilted her head up and he saw the face of a middle-aged human.

"Anyone I know?"

"His name's Fang Zar. I doubt you know him."

Of course Dey'rylan didn't; Fang Zar had been a Republic senator and one of Bel Iblis' closest friends. He'd also been dead for twenty-five years. But it was the code they'd agreed on, so Dey'rylan grabbed a chair and sat down at her table.

"I'm glad you came out," Dey'rylan said.

"It was a long trip," the woman replied coolly. "I hope you have something important to say."

"Okay. Well, for a start, my name is Reyan Dey'rylan and I work for New Republic military intelligence."

She allowed a tiny smirk. "All right. I'm Sena Leikvold Midanyl and I work for General Bel Iblis."

"Very good. I'm glad we can be honest."

"Then let me be more honest. The general doesn't trust you and he doesn't trust Mon Mothma. He thinks this is some kind of ploy to draw him out, to eliminate his forces so she

can consolidate her control over all the anti-Imperial factions.”

“And you take his word on that?”

“I’ve been with him since before the Old Republic fell. Of course I do.”

Well, it seemed being nice and charming wasn’t going to work on this woman. Dey’rylan gave her his best toothy Bothan grin and said, “I’ll be honest too, then. I think your general is a paranoid, stubborn old man who can’t see what’s dead in front of him. We killed Palpatine. *We* did.” He jabbed a claw at his chest. “My mentor died getting those Death Star plans. A couple weeks ago one of my best friends bought it so we could kill two grand admirals at Tralus. And all those rebel factions your boss seems to think should be his to command? They’re all on *our* side. And they’re not just factions any more, they’re the New Republic, a *real* government. If your boss doesn’t want to become even more of a relic than he already is, he’d better swallow his pride and come crawling back to Mon Mothma, because otherwise history’s going to pass him by.”

To signal he was done, he took a very long swig of ale. It was just what he needed.

Midanyl, meanwhile, sat back in her chair with her arms crossed over her chest. “Was that supposed to be a peace offering?”

“It was honesty.”

“Is that why you had me come all the way to the Corporate Sector? So you could give me some rude ultimatum in a cheap dive bar?”

“No. I was just expressing my opinion.” He took another swig of ale. “I also wanted to talk about something more specific.”

“Like what?”

“Like killing Grand Admiral Makati.”

He saw interest flicker in her eyes, but she did a good job of hiding it. “We heard your people tried to do that at Bandomeer. It didn’t work very well.”

“This time it will be different. You can help.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table. “I’m not asking him to go crawling to Mon Mothma, not yet. What I’m giving him is

an opening, a chance to try working together on one mission."

"Who's in command? Ackbar?"

"Willham Burke."

Midanyl looked thoughtful.

"He flew starfighters under your boss for a little while," Dey'rylan added.

"I know that. Was he the one who suggested this?"

"That's right." A white lie wouldn't hurt. "Burke wants to bring your boss and mine back together again. A lot of people do. There's no point in your trying to fight a private war against the Empire with your little fleet when we're on the verge of putting Isard down for good."

"How do you expect us to help kill Makati with our *little* fleet?"

"We need to surprise him, like he surprised us with Mandos at Bandomeer."

"Are you trying to draw him into a fight?"

"Actually, our first plan is to assassinate him."

Midanyl stared at him for three long seconds before saying, "A smart choice."

He was starting to like her a little. "If that doesn't work, we're going to lure him into a battle here in the Corporate Sector."

She thought for a moment, then said, "It's about as far away from the Core as you can get. And boxed in by Zsinj and Teradoc's territory."

"Exactly." He leaned in a little closer. "I'm not asking for a decision right away. I'm asking for you to take this back to your boss and let him decide." He took a datacard and placed it on the table. "This is for him. It will tell him how to contact Admiral Burke. Take it or not, it's up to you."

She looked down at the card. "He won't agree."

"Not even for his old wing commander?"

She shook her head. "The last time we worked with Mon Mothma, too many of our people died. The general values his troops. He'd not going to throw them away on someone else's fight."

Dey'rylan sighed. "I'm going to be honest again. Look at the state of the galaxy right now. Your boss was a hero and

rebel and senator and all that, but what is he now? What role is he playing in all this? After everything that's happened in the past couple years- Brentaal, Kashyyyk, Tralus, Endor- does he really think he can accomplish anything by standing on the sides? A generation from now, when they start writing history on the fall of the Empire and the birth of the New Republic, who do you think they'll write about? Mon Mothma, Princess Leia, Fey'lya, Ackbar, Burke, all the rest. And Garm Bel Iblis? He'll get a footnote if he's lucky. I can see it now: 'Stubborn old man who didn't know what was best for him.'"

Midanyl looked at him sourly. "I thought I'd be meeting a diplomat."

"I'm too honest for that."

She took the datacard. "Just like the general, then."

"Maybe so. I hope I get to meet him someday."

"I won't promise anything."

"I wouldn't believe you if I did." He said, and took another long swig of ale.

He didn't stay for much longer after that; there was one more shuttle going back to the Lanchenzoor Estate, this one a quarter-full of night-workers who'd be on shift until dawn. Dey'rylan, though, sneaked back into the building where they were housing the diplomats and went straight to his quarters. It didn't take him long to slice back into the comm system and send a message to Admiral Drayson. It was as spare and simple as could be: MESSAGE DELIVERED.

As soon as he sent it, he realized he'd also received something from the admiral. It, too, was spare and simple: MAKATI OUTBOUND FOR CORPORATE SECTOR. GO TO BONADAN NOW.

Winter had joined Leia in the privacy of the Councilor's suite. It was more spacious than any room she'd stayed in for the past year, maybe longer, and Leia was unsurprised when Winter said, "It reminds me a little of your father's place on Alderaan."

"In some ways," Leia admitted. "When I look out on all those grassy hills and see the mountains in the distance... But not everything."

"No, not everything." Winter's expression went downcast; Leia at least had the mercy of slowly forgetting her home-world, but Winter's eidetic memory lost nothing over time.

Trying to sound cheerful, Leia added, "It's pretty tacky."

Winter smiled softly. "Yes. Bail's taste in interior decor was always a little more... restrained. Tasteful."

"Restraint is not a term I've ever associated with the CSA. Or taste."

"Agreed. Here they think there's no point to making money if you don't get to show it off."

Winter sat down on the princess's bed; Leia hopped onto the cushions and sat cross-legged beside her. The mattress bounced under them both and for a tiny second it really did feel like they were kids again, back on Alderaan, swapping gossip in her bedroom late at night.

Childhood and Alderaan were long gone, but they were back to swapping gossip.

"I'm not sure what to make of Lankar Dright," Leia said. She glanced at the datapad onto which she'd recorded notes during breaks in the day's talk, while the memory was still fresh and before the new session brought new concerns. It was a trick her father had taught her.

"He does seem to be more adversarial than Lanchenzoor or Go'thal," Winter said.

"Do you think it's a role he's playing, like Im'nel?"

"Maybe. He seems to behave in a very reactive manner, like he's trying to poke holes in all our arguments." Winter paused, then added, "I think he may be a glitbiter."

"A spice addict? Really?"

"His behavior and body language fit the pattern. He talks very quickly, and he moves quickly too. He's more animated than the other and he always seems like he's trying to hold in excess physical energy."

"Doesn't that usually create more outward signs, like dilated pupils?"

"That can be easily hidden. But from what I've seen of glitbiters in the past, he seems like he could be a high-functioning addict."

Leia frowned. Even though she'd always thought of herself as a wilder counterpart to her friend's stoic poise, Winter's

NRI career had taken Winter to more dark corners of the galaxy than her diplomatic work.

"Isn't glitterstim supposed to give you some limited telepathy?"

"That's what they say. Depending on the individual it can produce anything from sharp empathic skills to heightened reflexes to some telepathy. The effects are sharpest just moments after use, so I don't think Dright is pulling secrets from our mind."

"Well, that's good to know."

"It's something to be aware of from now on."

"I'll spread the word, quietly. Any hidden vices you've uncovered in the others? Or are they all what they appear to be?"

Winter hesitated before saying, "I don't think so."

"But?"

The white-haired woman looked away. "It has nothing to do with the CSA people."

"What else, then? One of ours?" Leia's body tensed.

"Possibly. How familiar are you with Borsk Fey'lya's people?"

"His aides? Im'nel's established a reputation as one of our best diplomats, though I've never worked with him until now. They say he'd very intuitive and very good at reading his counterparts. Or baiting them, like he did yesterday"

"And the others?"

"I've met Tav Brei'lya before. He's been Borsk's aide for years. Not the best diplomat, but he's loyal, so I'm not surprised he came along."

"And Dey'rylan?"

"I've never met him. Borsk told me he was a last-minute addition. Someone new from the diplomatic school on Bothawui."

"Doesn't that strike you as odd, bringing someone green on a mission this important?"

"It does, but if I picked apart every decision Borsk made we wouldn't have time for anything else." She leaned in closer. "Winter, what is it?"

"I heard something from Tycho..." Winter's voice faltered at the mention of his name; then she continued, "He said that

on their mission to Boudolayz, they protected a strike team from fleet intel, under Admiral Drayson. He said the leader of that team was a black-furred Bothan.”

“Those aren’t uncommon.”

“I know. But Cracken sent somebody on this mission. Why wouldn’t Drayson?”

Leia leaned back on the mattress. “You know, I’m relieved. I thought you were going to say he was an Imperial spy.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

“But are you worried about Dey’rylan? Cracken and Drayson are on the same side.”

“Just like you and Fey’lya.”

“I hope they get along better than that.”

“They do, I think. I’m not sure. They run different departments with different goals, but there’s still some overlap. It’s nothing I’m worried about. It’s just...”

“Something to keep in mind going forward?”

“Exactly.”

“All right then.” Leia paused and examined Winter’s down turned profile. Wondering about Dey’rylan seemed to have turned her mind to Tycho. Winter hid her worries well; it was something another being probably wouldn’t have caught, but Leia could see it.

“He’ll be fine,” she said softly.

“I hope so.” Winter’s right hand squeezed crumpled bedsheets.

Leia put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I’ll let you in on a secret. You want to know the thing about these cocky flyboys who think they can do the impossible? They really can. And they do it all the time.”

Winter allowed a tiny smile. “You sound like you’ve had experience.”

“Time and again,” Leia assured her. “Time and again.”

Dey’rylan spent the rest of that night flinging out short comm signals to the rest of his team, confirming the Kasck, Karr, Torr, and Ekrhine had all arrived on Bonadan and that everything was going according to plan. With that done, he made a local connection with the spaceport in town and

reserved his place on the morning transport to Bonadan Spaceport Northeast II.

With all that done, he was left with one last awkward task: Quitting his position after less than a week on the job.

There was no point in dithering. As Borsk Fey'lya's ostensible aide, he knew the councilor's schedule, and he knew Fey'lya got up at 0600 hours to have breakfast and review his notes from the day before. Therefore, at 0615, he went down to the banquet hall where they'd had that fancy dinner two nights before and found the councilor at one end of the empty table, seated next to Brei'lya while his protocol droid looked over his shoulder. It was a shame he wouldn't be able to send Drayson anything else recorded from that droid, but there were more important things to do now.

"Councilor Fey'lya," he said, "May I have a moment of your time?"

The councilor looked up from his datapad. "Of course. Have a seat, please."

"I'd like a word in private, sir."

Fey'lya glanced at Brei'lya and waved a paw. "It's all right, Tav. Go check on Tresk."

The other Bothan nodded and waved the droid after him as he left the room. Dey'rylan waited until the bronze machine had shuffled out of sight before sitting down in the seat Brei'lya had just abandoned.

Fey'lya folded his paws on the table. "Well? I assume this is important."

"It is, sir. I'm afraid I have to go now."

Fey'lya's violet eyes narrowed. "Go where?"

"Back to Thoran, sir. I just received word that my father is very ill."

"Is he? More ill than he was a week ago?"

"It's very sudden. Nal'ragic fever, they said. You know it still afflicts Bothans on the colonies." He was playing for sympathy there; they often said that much of Fey'lya's political drive came from insecurity of having been raised on backwater Kothlis instead of the capital.

Fey'lya's fur flattened against his face. "Yes, I know. My grandfather died from it. I thought things had improved on Thoran by now."

"That might be what they say in the capital," Dey'rylan gave a helpless shrug. "But Bothawui is a far way from Thoran."

"Very true." Fey'lya drummed two claws on the tabletop, then said, "There's no point in being coy."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"For whom do you really work? Cracken?"

"Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Drayson, then. Cracken already had Princess Leia's aide here for him, and she has an eidetic memory. I'll bet you're reporting to Admiral Drayson."

"Councilor—"

"Please. The Bothan Diplomatic Service suddenly gives me a new aide right before a high-level meeting. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"No," Dey'rylan said honestly. He could lie with the best of them, but right here and now, there didn't seem a point.

"And now you're being called away. I assume this *also* comes from Drayson?"

There was no point in being coy or ashamed either. He met Fey'lya in the eye and said, "Yes, and it's vitally important that I get off Etti IV right now."

"Why? Is there a danger here?"

"No, sir." He told himself that was true. He would make it true. "Please don't ask any more questions. What I'm doing is highly classified, but I assure you it's for the good the Republic and the good of your mission."

"Ah, so it's for my own good, but you won't tell me what *it* is, will you?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't risk the safety of my mission."

Fey'lya stared at him intently for a long, long moment. Then the councilor snorted and leaned back, arms crossed over his chest. "You may not have been to our diplomatic schools, but I'll bet you did come through our spy network."

"That's right."

"Did you ever meet Koth Melan?"

Dey'rylan felt weight settle in his chest. "I did, sir."

"You reminded me of him just then. Your devotion. Your fearlessness. Koth Melan was not afraid of dying if his death

served the Republic and the Bothan people. I can see the same is true of you.”

Dey’rylan was suddenly short of breath; he felt like he was on the verge of weeping. “Koth Melan was a mentor to me.”

“Then you honor his memory, and our people. Good luck on your mission. I’ll help you any way I can, if you need it. Tav already gave you my personal encryption key, correct?”

Dey’rylan nodded and clasped his paws together to keep them from trembling. “Thank you, sir I truly appreciate that.”

“Then go now. I’ll explain away your absence.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.”

He stood, slightly shaking. He gave Fey’lya a bow, turned, and marched out of the dining room. Everything felt dream-like as he went back up to his chambers and hastily packed his things. For one moment he sat down on his soft bed, bigger and softer and more luxurious than anything he’d slept on in his life, taking one deep breath after another, wondering if he was really about to follow in Koth Melan’s footsteps, if he was brave enough to face death like that. If he knew he’d succeed before he died, maybe. He might be okay with it.

He physically slapped himself, one hard blow across the snout, like that would knock all the morbid thoughts away. There was no time to be afraid or to be maudlin. He had to get on the morning transport to Bonadan and meet up with the rest of Alpha Black. Then everything would go according to plan, they’d kill Makati, and then they’d all go back to *Home One* and share the bottle of Atrivis ale that Dey’rylan had snuck into the admiral’s desk before leaving. For a victory like that, even teatoatling Drayson would have to join in the drinking.

He grabbed his bags and marched out of the building. At this hour of the morning a small crowd of workers were entering the estate to begin their day shifts as servant, cooks, and mechanics, but even with all those moving bodies it was hard to miss the tall human woman, white-haired but still young, waiting by the shuttle embarkation point. She wore simple jacket and trousers now, a far cry from the elegant Alderaanian gowns she’d worn during the conferences; the sudden change made her seem intimidating.

He saw her and she saw him. There was no point in hiding so he walked right up to her. The shuttle was still a few minutes away and they stood to the side of the short boarding queue.

“Well,” he said, dropping his bag at his feet. “I’m impressed. I only told Fey’lya I was going a few minutes ago.”

“People in our line of work have to stay on top of the latest developments.” Winter folded her arms over her chest.

“Fair enough.”

“I’ll bet Drayson sent you.”

He considered telling her Fey’lya had just made the same bet but decided against it. The councilor could guard his own secrets. Dey’rylan simply nodded.

“For you to leave so soon, there has to be a reason.”

“Would you believe my father on Thoran came down with nal’ragic fever?”

“We’re on the same side here.”

“True. But some things are need to know. People in our line of work should understand that.”

Winter nodded reluctantly. “I just need to know one thing. I need you tell me the truth. Can you do that?”

“I won’t know until you ask the question.”

“Is Princess Leia in any danger?”

She spoke with the heavy conviction of one friend determined to protect another. It shouldn’t have taken Dey’rylan by surprise, but it did. He’d forgotten that some people in their line of work had priorities beyond the work.

“Is she in danger?” Winter pressed.

He found he couldn’t lie to her, not completely. “If everything goes according to plan, no. None of you will be in any danger.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m not reassured.”

“I will be doing everything I can to keep the councilors safe. I’m sure you’ll be doing the same here.”

Her face tightened with a restrained scowl. “If something goes wrong, if the councilors *are* in danger, is there any way you can warn me?”

“I have Fey’lya’s personal encryption key. If something happens, I’ll let him know.”

“Well. I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

“You can trust the councilor. As you said, we’re all on the same side.”

“I guess you have me there.” Winter angled her head sideways, so white hair fell over half her face. She stared at him, unreadable through the veil, then asked, “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

The shuttle whined as it settled down in its berth. He raised his voice to say, “I don’t think so. But thanks for the offer.”

As queue beside them started to move. Dey’rylan bent, grabbed his bag, and slung it over his shoulder. When he reared upright again Winter had extended a hand. He stared at that smooth white palm for a moment, then took it and shook. Then he turned and joined the queue. He glanced over his shoulder just once, when he was climbing aboard the shuttle. He scanned the thinning crowds, but Winter was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BONADAN

Before responding to the call by High Admiral Treuten Teradoc, Leonia Tavira made sure she was appropriately dressed. Despite being a breakaway warlord, Teradoc was still claiming to be a legitimate servant of the Galactic Empire, so Tavira dug through her wardrobe and retrieved the old gray Moff's uniform she'd worn back on Eiattu. Her own days of serving the Empire were long gone, if they'd ever really existed in the first place, but it was important to remind Teradoc that they'd come from the same place. Still, presenting herself a loyal Imperial was a step too far, so she wove a red bandana around her head and let the right flank of the uniform jacket hang rakishly open.

She decided it was good enough, and therefore time to return Teradoc's call.

He hadn't been the only one to answer, of course. Once Lankar Dright had flown for his secret conference on Etti IV, she'd sent out missives to a number of potentially interested parties, including Teradoc, Zsinj, Kaine, Krennel, Drommel, and for good measure several of the Black Sun vigos and Hutt kajidics who were still scrambling among themselves for pieces of dead Xizor and Jabba's criminal empires. To all of them she'd offered the same thing: Borsk Fey'lya and Leia Organa to the highest bidder. She'd even sent out a message to Ysanne Isard herself. After the pittance the regent had given her for Pestage, Tavira hadn't actually planned on replying to the woman's offer, but she'd looked forward to turning her down. Isard, alas, hadn't even taken the bait

But others had, and Teradoc seemed to have the most intriguing offer. He said he was willing to give her a ship of her own; he hadn't specified what kind, but he implied it would be far mightier than the old, refitted *Courtesan*.

When his holo came to life in front of her, she found herself looking at the head and shoulders of a heavysset human in an admiral's uniform, with a few extra markers and medals pinned to his chest. When he saw Tavira a white grin appeared beneath his bristly mustache.

"Well, Leonia," he said, "It's been a while."

"It's good to see you again, Treuton." She twirled black hair around one finger. "I heard you had an offer for me."

"I do, assuming *your* offer is still good."

"For now it is. I've got another tempting offer from Zsinj and it's *so* hard to chose."

Teradoc snorted. "And what is Zsinj offering you?"

In truth, he'd offered her partial ownership of a moon orbiting some gas giant in the Telos System. It was supposed to be a nice, lush, habitable moon, the perfect place to sit back and enjoy the rest of her life. Tavira, though, wanted something more.

"He offered me a spare star destroyer," she lied.

"A star destroyer? Really? For your very own purposes?"

"So he said."

Skeptical, Teradoc asked, "Did he say what *kind* of star destroyer?"

"An old *Victory II*-class, I believe. *Serpent's Smile*."

It was a real ship, and it was really serving under Zsinj. Odds were good Teradoc knew that; his brows furrowed deeper and he said, "Do you really think you can trust a man like Zsinj to fulfill his promises?"

"Not really. That's why I wanted to talk to *you*, Treuten. You also talked about a ship for me. I hope you weren't thinking of something smaller. After all, I'm sure you can spare more ships than Zsinj."

Teradoc's fat lips pressed together and he thought. Then he said, "Do you like your star destroyers in red? You seem fond of the color."

He was referring to his Crimson Command, a flotilla of dozens of *Victory*-class destroyers with scarlet hulls. They

were old ships but still good in a brawl; still, Tavira had been hoping, deep down, to get an *Imperial*-class ship of her own. She'd dreamed of commanding one of those mile-long warships since before she'd even laid eyes on old Moff Tharil Tavira. To a poor little girl growing up on Imperial-occupied Eiattu, there'd been no greater symbol of power.

"I do have a penchant for scarlet," Tavira admitted, "But I've always loved the off-white of a brand new destroyer."

Teradoc snorted. "You aim high, don't you, Leonia?"

"I always have, *Treuton*."

"One of those warships can burn an entire planet to rubble. Tell me, Leonia, what would you *do* with your own star destroyer?"

"Anything I want. Isn't that the point?"

He shook his head. "You're asking too much, my dear."

"Then I suppose our business is finished." She shook her head sadly. "I'll just have to take Zsinj up on his offer. *Serpent's Smile*. I do rather like that name."

"Wait!" Teradoc held up a hand. "I'm not giving you *anything* until I get Fey'lya and Organa in my possession."

"And I'm not giving you their location until I'm on the bridge of your star destroyer."

Teradoc made a low growling in his throat. "You're an infuriating girl."

She gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look. "I'm only trying to look out for myself, Treuten. It's a dangerous galaxy, after all."

"Indeed. This is my final offer. I will send a ship to rendezvous with you: the star destroyer *Invidious*. *Imperial*-class. Once those two councilors are in my possession- and not a moment before- I will have over command of *Invidious* to you."

She stared at his blurry holo-image. Even if Tyrac were here, he wouldn't have been able to tell if Teradoc were lying, not unless they were in-person. Still, Tavira's gut told her he'd given in too easily, and that he had no real intention of surrendering *Invidious* to her.

Still, he was offering her a chance to get on the bridge of a star destroyer for the first time in her life. If she got that far, she could figure out the rest.

"Treuton, I think we have a deal," she said at last. "When and where shall we rendezvous?"

"*Invidious* currently docked at Centares. She can reach the Corporate Sector in three days."

"Excellent. When your people reach the border, have them call me. I'll rendezvous and tell them where to go from there. I'm glad we could meet an agreement."

"As am I." He nodded. "Until we speak again, Leonia."

"Until then," she smiled sweetly, then turned off the comm.

It was a start. She'd have to talk to Tyrac and her other lieutenants about what to do once they were actually aboard *Invidious*. None of them yet knew where Dright and the Rebels were having their conference; it was a secret securely kept in her head and no place else. As she pondered whether and when to give this information to her crew, her commlink started to buzz.

She picked it up. It was Tyrac. "Captain, are you there?"

"What is it, Van?"

"You need to get to the bridge right away. The Imperial star destroyers just dropped into orbit, dead over this port."

Tavira swore inwardly and hurried down the halls and up the lift to *Courtesan's* bridge. Its wide forward viewport looked out on a cityscape tinted faintly yellow by the polluted air. The command deck was nearly empty as it sat on the landing pad, but she immediately spotted Tyrac with her first officer, a Yuzzem about four times her size who nonetheless followed her orders without question.

"Talk to me, Wukh," she said as she approached his position at the main sensor readout. "Where are these three destroyers?"

"Two star destroyers, actually, plus an interdicator cruiser." The Yuzzem tapped the readout screen with his claw. "Sitting steady in mid-orbit right over us."

"Did the drag ship put up its gravity wells?"

"Not yet. Seems like there's been some comm traffic between one of the Impstars and the CSA headquarters complex."

Tavira looked over the sensor screen. None of the new arrivals seemed to be deploying starfighters or support craft, which probably meant that they were here to intimidate

rather than attack, at least for now. Then her eyes were drawn to the ID markers naming the three Imperial ships. The drag ship was called *Constrainer*, the rear Impstar *Tenacious*. And the forward ship was called *Steadfast*.

"Grand Admiral Makati is here," Tavira said.

"The old Imp Advisor?" Tyrac asked from her shoulder. "What does that mean, Captain?"

"I'm not sure," she muttered, but she thought she had a clue. When Isard hadn't bothered to reply to her announcement, she'd assumed the regent was just being the petty witch she usually was. Now it looked possible that Isard already knew where the rebel councilors were meeting-

-Or thought she did. If she really *did* know about Etti IV, she'd have sent Makati there directly. She'd probably picked up only snippets of intel and sent Makati to ferret out the real location. And *Invidious* was still three days away.

This, she decided, could turn into the worst kind of surprise.

"Have they thrown up any kind of jamming field?" she asked Wukh.

The Yuzzem shook his shaggy head. "Don't think so. Except- wait, there it is. Stang. *Steadfast* just put out a directed dampening signal. They're trying to block all communications from Northeast II."

"And *only* Northeast II," Tyrac said. "If all Bonadan went dark, the rest of the Corporate Sector would notice right away. Right now they can pass this off as some local black-out, maybe an accident."

"This way he won't tip off the rebels," Wukh agreed. "My bet is they'll ground all outgoing ships too."

"What about communications between *Steadfast* and the ground?" asked Tavira.

Wukh shook his head again. "Nothing."

"Then we can bet Makati's prepping a shuttle to come down to the planet himself. Van--"

"I'll see what eyes we can get on the port. He'll probably be landing at the executive complex. That's a secure area."

"I want visual confirmation of Makati and whoever comes to meet him. Use your Force powers and *make* them let you in if you have to."

Tyrac made a growling sound deep in his throat, but nodded. "All right. Give me a minute to wrangle up a few—"

"Four TIE Interceptors have just left *Steadfast*," Wukh announced. "Looks like a shuttle's coming out right behind them."

"Go yourself, Van," Tavira said firmly. "Go *now*."

The planet Bonadan was often cited by experts as an example of how a densely-populated, urbanized, industrialized port planet could successfully reduce blaster-related violence to almost zero. The CSA had invested a staggering amount of credits into building automated weapon-sensing stations in every landing complex and at key locations throughout the cities. The sensors used sophisticated recognition software that could detect not only gas-powered ammunition packs for standard blasters but even primitive slug-throwers and other obscure or archaic projectile weaponry. The only ranged weapons a visitor to Bonadan typically saw were the rifles used by the CSA Security Police, commonly called Espos, and on Bonadan they almost always limited themselves to non-lethal (but nonetheless very effective) stun-guns primarily used for apprehending violent criminals or controlling disruptive crowds.

Still, no system was perfect. Reyan Dey'rylan was proud of how the rest of Alpha Black had proven this. His team had arrived on Bonadan piecemeal: Kasck Fre'leir on a passenger transport inbound from Tantive, Sho-Tev Ekrhine with a freighter full of shipwrights coming back from Trianii space, and Devin Torr and Jekk Karr aboard a Corellian YT-2000 transport that Drayson had provided.

The Espos had been especially thorough checking the ostensible freight-haulers' ship, but nothing in their search had raised their attention. Karr and Torr had brought a few Czerka blaster pistols and one MerrSonn ZX-17 rifle aboard, as any good fringers would, but as long as they stayed aboard they stayed within regulations.

The weapons detectors littered around the docking complex, however, were not set off when Karr detached the barrel from the MerrSonn and stuck it in a compartment of his longcoat. Nor did they detect the flammable powder Ekrhine

kept in his pocket, nor the tiny combustion chamber in Torr's. They certainly didn't notice the supply of needles Kasck Fre'leir carried with him. Each one was the exact caliber to fit snugly in MerrSonn's barrel interior, and each was tipped with a tiny capsule of liquid poison.

All of this had been in preparation for what was happening right now. The landing zone reserved for executive CSA officials was a part of the overall docking complex for Spaceport Northeast II, but access was highly restricted. Kasck and Torr had scouted the place thoroughly while Dey'rylan was still on Etti IV, and by the time the Bothan arrived they'd put together an infiltration plan. The moment *Steadfast* appeared in orbit, they sprung into motion. While Ekrhine and Karr stayed behind with the YT-2000 freighter to monitor the situation, Torr led them to an unguarded waste shaft. The foul-smelling tunnel in turn led them to a series of maintenance catwalks that spanned the different sub-sections of the docking complex. Moving about in broad daylight was the most dangerous part, but the walkways quickly led them into another interior hallway.

Now that they were clear of spotters and weapon scanners, they stopped to put together Kasck's longbarrel needle-gun. As Torr stayed in the hallway to guard their backs, the two Bothans crept forward toward the executive landing pad. There was one secured doorway before reaching their location, but Dey'rylan was able to slice through its protective firewalls and open the door without triggering alarms. After that, they had access to another series of upper-level maintenance walkways that stretched around the rim of the walled-off landing pad.

Ideally, they would have crept into the southeast corner, the one above the pad's main entrance and exit portal, then waited for a clean shot at Makati. Unfortunately, the grand admiral had chosen to arrive at a time of day when the east and south walls were both bright with sunlight, which forced them to take up positions in the shadows clinging to the southwest and northeast corners.

They got in place just in time. A half-dozen Espos in their typical dark-gray riot gear were arranged to meet the grand admiral, and standing at their head were two more humans,

one in a well-cut business suit, the other in an olive-gray Imperial uniform. Dey'rylan turned on his macrobinoculars and zoomed in on those men. The one in the business suit had grey-stubbed hair and the thick, wide-shouldered body of an aging drill sergeant. That marked him as the ExO, Jevith Leon, Clone Wars veteran and later Sienar Fleet Systems operations manager. The one in the actual Imp uniform could only be Makati's successor as Imperial Advisor, Tise Maloc, formerly Moff of the Oplovis Sector.

He brought his comlink to his lips and whispered, "Kasck, you in position?"

"I'm as good as I'll ever be."

"You see the two unarmed humans in the front?"

"Hard to miss."

"If you think you can drop them once you've got Makati, go for it."

There was a long, considered pause. Kasck's needle-gun had to be manually cocked between shots, and every second they stayed here after nailing the grand admiral meant it would be that much harder to escape with their lives.

Then Kasck said, "Understood, Boss."

Dey'rylan heard the low roar of an approaching shuttle and looked up. He watched as Makati's *Lamba*-class transport folded its wings and set down in the center of the landing pad below.

He thumbed his comlink back on and said, "Okay, everyone. Showtime."

When the shuttle's landing ramp slid to the ground, Grand Admiral Makati waited a moment before stepping down. He glanced to his side at F-4GR and said, "Please be alert, Forger."

"Of course, sir." The droid twisted his metal body sideways to angle his photoreceptors on the four storm-troopers standing behind him in the cabin, each one clasp ing a standard issue E-11 blaster rifle to his chest. "Are you certain the local constabulary will allow your guards to carry weapons?"

"I'm not. That's why I wanted you with me."

"I see, sir. Rest assured I'll do my best to protect you."

"I never doubted it." Makati looked down at his uniform and tugged a few tiny creases out of it. "All right. Let's go talk to Leon."

He held his head upright as he walked down the ramp. Waiting for him, as expected, were Jevith Leon in his crisp dark business suit and Tise Maloc in his gray uniform. Makati stopped in the shadow of the shuttle's cockpit and said, "Thank you for coming to greet me, gentlemen."

"Welcome back to the Corporate Sector, sir," said Maloc, though the grand admiral's eyes never left Leon.

His last conversation with the ExO before initiating local jamming of Northeast II had hardly been friendly; the man had denied knowing anything about supposed CSA executives meeting with Rebel agents on Bonadan, denied it so angrily that Makati was inclined to believe him. Ignorance of Rebel plots meant he was incompetent instead of treasonous, and that meant his career as ExO was still over. Leon was a big, firm man who usually balked at showing weakness or contrition; even now he was trying very hard to look assured, even as the Empire's punishment hung over him.

"Have you prepared a place for us to meet in private?" he asked the ExO.

Leon nodded. "Of course, sir. I'm confident we can get this all straightened out very quickly."

"So that is to say, you have *not* found Fey'lya or Organa?"

Leon swallowed. "Not at this time."

Maloc interjected, "Rest assured, sir, we have people investigating your claim right now."

"It is not a claim, it is a fact," Makati added a snarl to his voice. "Somewhere on this planet, right now, two of the most infamous Rebel leaders are plotting treason with CSA executives. I am not leaving Bonadan until they are found and apprehended."

"Rest assured, we'll do everything we can to make sure that happens," Leon said. "If you'll follow me, Admiral, I'll show you the progress we're making."

Maloc and Leon turned for the exit, but the Espo security guards in front of them didn't move. Leon did a good job hiding his chagrin as he turned back to Makati and said, "I'm sorry, Admiral, but I have to insist your stormtroopers hand

over their weapons. They'll be returned when you leave Bonadan."

"You lecture me on protocol *now*?"

"I'm sorry, but laws are laws and they must be obeyed. They're the very foundation of the Corporate Sector's sovereignty."

That was the loaded word, *sovereignty*. Makati had no official power to remove Leon from office; legally only the Direx could do that. The ExO was digging in his heels and declaring he wouldn't meekly surrender all the authority he'd gained just because some of his subordinates had started chats with the Rebels.

It would make Makati's job more difficult, but he could respect it. That stubborn pride had, until now, made Jevith Leon an effective administrator and, overall, a reliable Imperial ally. Making of a fight of it here would just make things harder later on. He might lose a bit of face now, but the two star destroyers overhead were all the face he needed.

"All right," Makati said. "Stormtroopers, lay down your weapons."

His white-armored guards responded without delay. They switched their rifles to an underhand grip and held them out at their sides for the Espos to claim.

It had been supremely frustrating, watching dark boots shuffle about beneath the overhang of the shuttle's cockpit. Kasck had twice already commed frustrated grumbling about not getting a good shot. But when the stormtroopers lowered their weapons to their sides, Dey'rylan's pulse quickened. He was surprised they were surrendering their guns to the Espos, but if they were, it meant Makati would be on the move within seconds, out from beneath the protective overhang and right into Kasck's sights.

He watched more boots and legs shuffle about as the Espos too the guns. Then he saw Leon and Maloc turn around once more and begin walking toward the exit. They stepped out of the shadows and into the sunlight; Makati would be next

He zoomed in with the macrobinoculars to get the clear view. First he saw the grand admiral, scowling slightly and squinting into the bright light. Shuffling alongside him was a

protocol droid that looked like it had seen many better days; what an Imperial grand admiral was doing with that antiquated hardware Dey'rylan didn't know, and right now he didn't care.

He flicked on the comlink and said, "Kasck, do you have the shot?"

"That fragging droid, it's blocking my kill! Wait, look!"

It all happened at once: The four Espos grabbed their newly-claimed stormtrooper rifles and raised them; two shot laser blasts right into the white-armored chests in front of them while the other two spun around toward Makati. The droid slammed a hand on the grand admiral's back, shoving him to the ground, then spun with surprising speed. A blaster sprung out from the droid's right forearm panel and sprayed laserfire in the Espos' faces. The front two went down instantly; the other two popped off a round of laser blasts. One sparked across the droid's flank and another winged Maloc in the shoulder, but the droid's gun flashed again, and the other two Espos fell.

By the time the bodies hit the ground, the two remaining stormtroopers had reclaimed their rifles, thrown themselves around the grand admiral, and hauled him toward the exit. He disappeared through the portal; Leon and a staggering Maloc were right behind them.

They left behind a motionless landing pad. The armored corpses of two stormtroopers and four Espos cooled slowly in the sun.

Dey'rylan stared at it for what seemed like forever until Kasck's voice crackled on his comlink, saying, "Boss, what the kark was that?"

"I don't know," he grunted. "We need to go. Now."

The live-feed from Van Tyrac's macrobinoculars winked to nothing, and for a pregnant moment everything was silent on *Courtesan's* bridge. Tavira leaned back against a console, arms crossed over her chest, face twisted in a sour frown. Whatever had happened on that landing pad only raised more questions.

"Captain," Wukh grunted, "What does this mean for our plans?"

"At the moment I have no idea," she said. "But it can't be a coincidence that Makati is here."

"But the Rebels we're supposed to capture aren't on Bonadan. Right?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it. But if Makati's here that means he doesn't know where they really are. That gives us an advantage."

"Flight controls says all outbound ships on lockdown," the Yuzzem reminded her. "And this ship is fast, but I don't want to try to outrun those Imperials."

"I know. We'll sit tight for now and try to learn whatever we can about Makati."

There was a buzzing from the comm system. Wukh glanced over and said, "It's Tyrac."

"Put him on." Tavira went over to the console and leaned close. "Van, are you clear?"

"Yeah, I'm on my way back." The man's voice scratched with static. "I'll probably have to scramble a few heads to get back though."

"Just don't leave anything the Espos can trace back to us."

"I know what I'm doing." After a pause, Tyrac added, "I don't think I was alone."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw somebody running around the maintenance walkways over the rim of the landing pad."

"Did they see you?"

"No, I was too far away. They looked like Bothans."

"Bothans," Tavira repeated. The Rebels were after Makati. The Rebels had known he was coming. They might have even laid down bait, hoping to bring him to Bonadan. She knew, dead certain, that Dright was really meeting their leaders on Etti IV. But Makati was on Bonadan because the Rebels had drawn him here.

"Oh," she smiled, "Oh, that's very clever."

"Captain?"

"Just get back here, Van. I'll tell you later." She switched off the comlink and looked up to see Wukh and the rest of the bridge crew looking at her, confused and expectant. She enjoyed those looks almost as much as she'd enjoy the awe on their faces when she revealed what she'd realized.

But that would wait. She searched the crew and found the team's slicer, a short four-armed Xexto. "Billibango," she said, "I want you to get us a line into the port's security cameras. We need to find where those Bothans came from and where they're going back to."

"Right away, Captain," Billibango said, and hobbled away on his long spindly limbs.

A dumbfounded Wuhk grunted, "Captain, what does all this mean?"

Tavira had to think about that for a second. Then the answer was obvious, and it brought a smile to her face. "It means that there's a very elaborate game being played here. And right now, nobody has a better chance of winning than us."

After the assassination attempt, Leon ordered a complete personnel swap of Makati's planned security team, replacing the existing Espos with random men from other units. The men escorted the grand admiral, his droid, and his two remaining stormtroopers to newly-assigned quarters located in the underground complex beneath the CSA's administrative headquarters. The ExO and Tise Maloc assured Makati over an over that this was the most secure place on the entire planet, that there was no way he'd be in any more danger, that they'd soon find out who was responsible for the attack, and that they absolutely, positively had no involvement in it whatsoever.

Makati had known both men for years, and neither had shown acting skills before now. He chose to take their panic as genuine, not that it made him feel any better.

He had to wait for three hours in the lifeless subterranean box they called living quarters while a CSA tech replaced F-4GR's blaster-scorched metal shoulder pad with a new one. When he was done it was by far the shiniest part on the battered droid's body, and the tech asked Makati, "Sir, would you like us to give your droid a more thorough refitting?"

"A refitting?" Makati raised an eyebrow. "And why do you think F-4GR needs a refitting?"

Apparently the tech didn't notice the bitterness in Makati's tone, because he started explaining, "Well, most of its

exterior plating is at least two decades old, maybe three, and if his *exterior* is like that, his insides might be older.”

“And is that a problem?”

“Well, sir, droids wear out just like people. We usually recommend replacing parts after no more than fifteen years for optimal performance.”

“Perhaps you’re not aware, but this droid just foiled an assassination attempt by four of *your* Espos while *your* leaders looked on like dumbstruck banthas. From what I’ve seen so far, Forger is the only thing on this entire planet that’s performing optimally right now.”

The tech swallowed and said, “Understood, sir,” then took his gear and hurried out.

Makati gave a long, long sigh. F-4GR turned his photo-receptors on the grand admiral and said, “I believe we’re safe for the moment, sir. You should try and relax.”

“Relax?” Makati snarled. “How can I relax?”

“I admit I’m incapable of truly understanding the fear of death organic life-forms have,” F-4GR said, “I would fix you some tea if I could, sir, but this storage facility seems poorly-stocked for continuous inhabitation.”

“It’s not just the attack, Forger. While we’re sitting here, waiting for Leon and Maloc to figure out what happened on the flight deck, Rebel scum are somewhere on this planet, trying to spread their treason all over this sector. I didn’t come here to cower in a bunker, I came here to capture Fey’lya and Organa.”

“Hopefully Maloc and Leon will help us with that, sir.”

Makati snorted. “The CSA is falling apart under their noses. They didn’t notice until someone shoved it in their faces. They used to be better than this.”

That was part of his disappointment, he knew. When he been Imperial Advisor, he’d found Leon a capable and respectable administrator. When the Emperor had called him back to Imperial Center, he’d personally recommended Maloc as his successor. Their ineptitude reflected back on him, and he wondered what he could have done differently to prevent all of this from happening in the first place.

If he let his mind go down that road he’d get lost in his own doubt. Makati veered his thoughts onto another course and

said, "I'm sorry if I was too brusque with that tech, Forger. I didn't ask if you wanted any kind of refit."

"I'm content as I am sir," the droid said, then added, "I would not *object* to having other plating redone if it would please you, but I would recommend against that procedure here. The CSA techs might try to make unwanted modifications as well."

"Like removing your weapons?"

"Among others, sir. They might also tamper with my core matrix and try to affect my programming. I'm sorry to say it, sir, but I don't think we can trust anyone here."

"I'm well aware of that," Makati grimaced. He hadn't been expecting a sense of homecoming on his return to Bonadan, but he hadn't been expecting this either. He knew many beings on this planet, had worked with them for years, but the only one he felt he could trust right now was the automaton standing in front of him. As sad state of affairs; but then, it had been so for most of his life.

Rising self-pity was interrupted by the blare of his door alarm. Makati stalked over to the control panel and checked the feed from the exterior camera: Leon and Maloc. He unlocked the door and let them in.

"I want to reiterate how sorry I am about all this," Leon began. "I trust your accommodations are in good order?"

"They are, considering." Makati crossed his arms over his chest. "I didn't come here to sulk in a tomb, I came here to stop the Rebels before they buy the CSA out from under you. Have you found them yet?"

"Ah, no. But rest assured we're making progress."

"What kind of progress?"

"We're tracking down every Direx members, every Executive Viceprex, and every second- and third-level Viceprex on Bonadan. We're dispatching Espo teams to their locations now."

"A start," Makati admitted. "I'd like to oversee these operations personally."

"Of course, Admiral. As to the, ah, other matter-"

"You mean the attempted murder?"

"Exactly. Admiral, I believe we've made greater progress there."

“Go on.”

“The men who shot at you were, in fact, Security Agents. They’d all been Espos for between five and twelve years and received no major disciplinary marks.”

“No *major* marks?”

“One of them was flagged for having trouble with gambling debts, but we judged that minor. The point is, Admiral, we moved quickly to thoroughly examine their personal and financial histories.”

Makati was glad to see that the CSA still knew how to run a bureaucracy. “What did you find?”

“All four Espos had recently received sizeable payments of the same amount, from the same corporation.”

“Which corporation?”

“An asteroid mining company called Mar Adetta Systems Works. I hadn’t heard of it either, which was unusual. We looked into Mar Adetta further and found that it’s owned by another corporation, which in turned is owned by *another* shell company based in the Quelli Oversector.”

“Warlord Zsinj,” Makati reasoned.

“It seems very likely, sir,” Maloc spoke up. “No doubt he wanted revenge against you after Bandomeer.”

He should have expected that. The Corporate Sector abutted right against the warlord’s territory and he was sure to have other agents on Bonadan. The realization made Makati feel more under seige than ever.

Apologetically, Maloc added, “At least we know that much, sir. Rest assured we’ll ferret out his agents on Bonadan.”

“I’m glad. That will leave us only the Rebels to deal with,” Makati said sourly. “And how long do you think it will take us to locate *them*?”

Maloc and Leon exchanged gloomy looks. The latter said, “Our Espo teams are moving now, but sir, there’s the possibility they might *not* find something...”

“The Rebels are here, and they are scheming to oust you, Leon. You should accept that fact and thank me for saving your hide before the Rebels claim it.”

“I know, sir. It’s just that there are a number of Direx members and Viceprexes that *aren’t* on Bonadan. In fact, more than half.”

It had always been like that, Makati reminded himself. The CSA wasn't a proper government like the Empire, it was a conglomerate of aligned corporate interests, each of which was very averse to working lock-step with potential competitors. The Viceprexes and their administrative departments were what really welded the Corporate Sector into a functioning sovereignty, but even for them, Bonadan was more of a conference center than a permanent base. Many Viceprexes did most of their work on other planets.

"Which Viceprexes are offworld right now?" he asked.

Leon had to think a moment. "Lankar Dright is at a conference on Atchorb, I believe. Lanchenzoor is visiting Lythos and Rollmach is at his estate on Issagra. Ah, and Malor'dacan is overseeing a new production rollout on Ession."

"And where is Prex Go'thal?"

"Actually, he took a personal absence to visit his home-world, ZeHethbra."

Makati didn't like any of that. He knew Riga Lanchenzoor had always chafed at Imperial authority, and Go'thal had, in his own plodding bureaucratic manner, also tried to block many of Makati's initiatives during his years on Bonadan. Dright and Rollmach weren't political types, but Malor'dacan's propensity for independent thinking might have thrown the Twi'lek in with Go'thal and Lanchenzoor.

"Leon, I want you to start making quiet inquiries into those missing. Make sure they are where they claim they are."

"Admiral, if any of them *are* working with the Rebels, we might tip them off that way."

"That's why I want you to do it quietly. Find some ulterior motive for contacting each of them and stagger your calls so it doesn't all come at once." They'd risk the Rebels leaving on their own accord that way, but a series of simultaneous check-ups on all the missing officials would send them scrambling anyway.

"I'll get right on it," Leon said, paused, then added, "I should say, I *would* get on it, but all communications are being blocked right now. As you know."

"I know. *Steadfast* can modify her jamming to allow select comm frequencies through. Right now, the only opening is

my personal encrypted frequency to Captain Vivant, but he can allow more.”

“I can supply you with a list of executive CSA freqs.”

“Good. I’ll have Vivant open access for those, as well as Imperial freqs. I also want to call down more manpower from *Steadfast*. Can you show me to a secure comm system?”

Leon clearly wasn’t happy about more stormtroopers in CSA headquarters, but he nodded. “Of course, Admiral.”

“And after *that*, we need to check in on your Espo teams.”

“Some of them should be reaching their targets by now. Hopefully we can clear all this up very fast.”

Makati hoped so too, but he wasn’t expecting it, now that he knew which officials were missing in action. Isard’s intel must have been wrong. The meeting was taking place elsewhere, and the Corporate Sector had thirty thousand other systems to search. He had a feeling his stay in this ugly bunker was going to last longer than he wanted.

Makati opened the door and gestured for Leon and Maloc to go out first. He followed, and then F-4GR followed him. Maloc eyed the droid a little warily; he’d never seen F-4GR in action before and had, like everyone else, surely dismissed him as an antique relic the grand admiral kept around for sentimental reasons. Makati’s two stormtroopers were also waiting outside; they stood with E11 rifles clutched against their chests and this time, Leon made no objections.

Together, the six of them shuffled down the hall. They had a long search ahead of them.

As they sat in the hold of their parked YT-2000 freighter, watching the recording from Dey’rylan’s macrobinoculars, Ekhrine grunted, “That is one fast droid.”

“It doesn’t look like much, but I bet that’s the point,” Kasck added.

“Well, that’s one more obstacle to solve,” Torr shook his head and looked at Dey’rylan. “Any idea where to start, Boss?”

Dey’rylan had been trying to figure that out ever since the assassination attempt. After that, odds were good that Makati wouldn’t leave the inside of CSA headquarters until he went

back to *Steadfast*, and that meant they needed a way inside that massive complex.

“A shame we can’t call Drayson through all that jamming,” muttered Ekrhine as he turned off the projected recording and turned the hold’s overhead lights back on. “Now we have to think of a new plan on our own.”

“You stocked that stormtrooper armor on this boat, didn’t you?” Dey’rylan asked Torr.

The ex-Imperial nodded. “I’m not sure what you think we can do with it though. That whole fake-Bothan-prisoner gag isn’t going to work this time.”

“I know. I was thinking about trying to insert you or Karr inside the CSA complex.” He heard everyone intake breath and held up both paws. “I know, it’s not a great idea.”

“We’d look like pretty stupid stormies without guns,” Ekrhine said.

“Not to mention that Makati’s only got those two with him,” added Torr.

“Actually, we’re getting a couple boatfuls more,” Jekk Karr said as he marched in from the hallway leading to the cockpit. “*Steadfast* just sent down three DX-9 stormtrooper transports.”

“Well,” sighed Kasck, “I guess the grand admiral doesn’t trust the local security.”

“Who can blame him?” asked Karr as he dropped onto the sofa next to Ekrhine. “Are we really thinking of dressing up as stormies and sneaking into that complex? ‘Cos it’ll take a lot more than that.”

“And even if we *do* get close to Makati somehow,” Kasck added, “I’m not sure I can beat that old droid on a quick-draw.”

“With a snout like yours, you won’t get *near* him.”

“What we need are eyes and ears inside that complex,” Dey’rylan said. “We need to know what Makati’s doing in there.”

“Well, you’re the one who can slice anything,” Karr said. “Right?”

Dey’rylan’s fur bristled. He *could* slice anything, or just about, but the rest of his team had already run a thorough check while he was on Etti IV. Just as all the systems for this

landing complex were tied to one central, localized computer, the ones for the CSA admin complex were also arranged around one on-site processing core. If he could tap into that computer core he could, in theory, collect all the security feeds and internal audio transmissions pulsing through that complex. The size of the data yield would be extraordinary but with the rest of his team to help, they could screen out all the excess information and find the stuff relevant to Makati and his Imps. They might even be able to listen in on his conversations.

But first, he had to get into their computer system, and it was impossible to do that unless he was on-site.

"I need a place to plug in," he said finally. "Some kind of maintenance hatch, maybe."

"Or waste extraction," said Kasck. "It's how we got to that landing pad."

"We'll go over our scans of the complex," Torr said. "Don't worry, Boss, we'll find a place you can plug into."

"Yeah," Ekrhine added, "If the Death Star had a weak spot, a bunch of office buildings have to have plenty."

They were trying to make him feel better, and he honestly appreciated it. He tried to smile and make them think he was feeling confident, but he knew deep down their best window had closed on them. Getting to Grand Admiral Makati now was going to be a whole lot tougher.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ORRON III

At first, Daric LaRone had a hard time making sense of being alive. The first thing he noticed was the cold bite of wind of his face; later he felt dull heat and saw hazy light ahead ahead. At one point he felt something stab and scrape against his cheeks, but not enough to really hurt. Later on he realized it was grass, and that someone had been dragging him through a field. Then he remembered the smell of smoke and ash, the clamor of wailing alarms, and the sight of a swelling orange-brown planet that had seemed near enough to touch.

It finally all came together when he saw Brightwater's head hovering directly above him and heard the man's voice, slightly muffled, say, "I think his eyes are focusing."

"That's a start," someone else said, and a second later Grave's head appeared beside Brightwater's. "Hey Sarge, can you hear me?"

LaRone opened his mouth. He tried to speak but it came out like bleating. Then he started coughing; his body spasmed but it felt like it belonged to somebody else.

Brightwater dipped out of view, then came back with a canteen in hand. He poured watter into LaRone's mouth. He'd never tasted anything so sweet. He tried to speak again, and this time managed to force out a simple, "Thanks."

A grin bloomed on the scout's face. "You're welcome. You got a bad concussion, but I think you're gonna get out of it."

He croaked again, "Sitrep." He didn't know how much he'd understand but he hoped just hearing them talk might jog his memory.

"We're crashed, Sarge," Grave said. "Orron III, if you remember. The ship... Well, Quiller made the best crash-landing he could but it's not going to be flying anytime soon. Or ever."

"Quiller?"

"He's safe. So's Marcross and the package."

"Package?"

"Just a sec," Brightwater said, then turned his head and called, "He wants a closeup!"

Then the scout's head disappeared and another one took its place, half-silhouetted against a backdrop of rain-heavy clouds. He didn't recognize it at first; it was human, female, with tired blue eyes and short-cropped black hair framing an attractive face.

"I guess I should say thank you," she said. "And sorry for getting your ship crashed."

Her name, why couldn't he remember her *name*? He remembered busting onto that freighter and he remembered stupidly throwing off his stormtroopers helmet when he thought they were home free. He remembered how awkwardly she moved, and the big swell at her stomach.

"Baby?"

"I think it's okay. I think... I hope we'll *all* be okay."

"We couldn't salvage the comm from the ship," Grave said. "Quiller and Marcross are off scouting, trying to find some civilization so we can use *their* comms and call for help, but... Well, that might be hard."

"Hard?"

"Orron III's an agro-world. Barely any sentient population, mostly run by droids. And most of the surface, well..."

"Let's try sitting him up," Brightwater's voice said.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" the woman frowned.

"We'll move him very carefully. Hold."

LaRone felt hands beneath his body and head, felt them lift him up so his waist bended and the cloud-heavy sky swung upward and a vast field of high grain-stalks filled his vision. He turned his head carefully one way, then the other, and

saw nothing but grain stretching across a vast and perfectly flat landscape forever all around him.

There was a loud cracking noise, and he heard Grave say, "I think the weather control system hates us. We should set up a shelter."

"Agreed," said Brightwater. "Sorry, Sarge, but we're gonna lay you back down. Syal, keep him awake. Try to keep him talking."

The grass fell away and the sky came again. LaRone stared up at the clouds and felt the first few light drops tickle his face. Then the woman appeared over him again. Brightwater had called her *Syal* but he knew that wasn't right. She had a different name, a more stylish a dramatic name, a name everybody in the whole damn galaxy knew but he couldn't remember just now-

She reached out and placed one smooth hand on his cheek, gentle as a mother. "Call me Syal. Syal Antilles Fel."

Syal spent a lot of time over the next few days talking to Daric LaRone. The more he talked the more lucid he got. Words came out easier. They talked as they moved, which wasn't quickly.

Luckily it only rained once; after that the planet's weather control systems gave them nothing but clear sunny skies for the endless grain-fields to soak up. They salvaged enough material from the crashed ship to create a crutch Marcross could hobble on and a bier to drag LaRone through the tall grass, though once he got good enough to shamble upright they let Syal rest in there instead. Quiller said they were heading south toward the border of this seemingly endless crop-field, where it might be easier to find a drone barge or any other sign of civilization. She took his word for it and did her best to keep moving, no matter much her feet ached and her stomach revolted at the field rations that were all they had to eat.

All that time, she kept talking with LaRone. She stayed beside him as they marched in a long file through the endless fields, and gradually he explained everything. He started in reverse, saying that he'd been tasked to retrieve Syal and her husband alive on orders of an Imperial Grand Admiral whom

she'd never heard of. The grand admiral wanted Soontir to fly for him, which was unsurprising; everyone else in the galaxy did too. She said her husband wouldn't fight for the Empire again. LaRone laughed and said that he'd thought the same thing too.

He peeled back more layers after that. He talked about all the fighting they'd done in the Unknown Regions, battling monstrous alien warlords and keeping order in the chaos of ungoverned space. And he talked about how their team had first met Thrawn, and their months on the run after shooting an ISB agent. He even claimed to have had multiple run-ins with Rebel heroes like Han Solo and Luke Skywalker. The whole thing sounded so preposterous she found herself believing him; nobody would have dared make up that crazy of a lie.

Orron III had long days and long nights, at least three times the Coruscant standard, and Syal had almost got used to sleeping under sunlight when the long dark finally settled over them. The dark didn't get as cold as she'd expected. Marcross said they had the artificial weather control to thank for that; they obviously couldn't let the crops get frosted over. The land was so flat they often marched easily through the dark. To Syal it was starting to seem like they'd be marching forever.

The second time they set down to rest in the dark, Syal waited until everyone else had gone to sleep to ask LaRone, "Why is it different now, serving your grand admiral?"

"What do you mean?" he asked as they sat on either side of the glowlamp Brightwater had planted in the center of clearing.

"You know what I mean. You're still an Imperial, aren't you? You're still in that armor."

He turned his head and looked into the dark. "I'm not what I signed up to be."

"What did you sign up to be?"

"To be a stormtrooper. Which apparently meant shooting civvies whenever your CO told you to. Summary executions without trial." He stopped, then added, "Letting whole planets get vaped just because somebody wanted to show off his big gun."

"But you didn't know that going in."

"I should have. Everybody heard stories about nasty things the Empire did. I was told it was all Rebel propaganda, and I believed that for a long time."

"What did you *think* you were going to be when you signed on?"

He thought about that for a while, then said, "I wanted to keep the peace. The galaxy... It's a hard place. I heard stuff from the Rebels- the New Republic- now and they make it sound like if everybody sat down at a big table and hold hands and talk everything out then there'd be no wars or anything. Lady, I've seen a lot of things out in the Unknown Regions and a lot of those don't care how pretty you can talk. They don't care about compromise or democracy or anything like that."

"There's nothing wrong with those things."

"Maybe not. But they don't work all the time. Somebody has to protect other people from things that don't share their sense of right and wrong."

"Then that's why you put on your uniform. To protect people from all the nastiness that's out there."

"I guess you could put it that way."

"It sounds like your uniform betrayed you, not the other way around. And it sounds like that you signed up to do all those years ago is what you finally ended up doing now." She paused, then added, "I've seen all this before, you know."

He couldn't know how much he reminded her of her husband. She found herself hoping they'd get a chance to meet one day. They had the same simple ideals weathered by a hard universe, and the same need to serve some larger cause that embodied those ideals. Syal had never felt any of that; she'd run away from Corellia all those years ago because she'd been young and eager and selfish. She'd taken up acting for the satisfaction it had given her; she'd never been political and had never felt the need so serve a higher cause like Soontir or LaRone. It was because she and Soontir were so different that they'd been drawn to each other in the first place; their marriage had felt like combining two opposite halves of one whole.

"Can I ask a personal question?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You weren't already?"

She smiled a little. "I was wondering what you'll do when all this is over."

"When all what's over?"

"This mission you're on. What happens then? Just move on to the next one?"

"Probably. Out there in the Unknown Region, there's always more threats."

"To be honest, it doesn't sound like much of a life."

He looked into the light of the glowlamp. "It's what we all have. When I plugged that ISB agent, I lost everyone I ever had. I lost *everything* for my whole team." He didn't have to say he felt guilty about it; she could hear it plainly in his voice. "What I've got now... Well, maybe you're right. Maybe it's what I wanted all along, and the old Empire couldn't give me. I can't complain about that. When we first went on the run, I thought we'd be lucky to last a year before we got shot as traitors."

"Out there in the Unknown Regions, do any of you have..." She rested a hand on the swell of her stomach. "Any family at all?"

He looked at the sleeping forms of his four squad-mates. "We have each other, and the other guys we've been training."

"Is that really enough?"

"It's what we have."

Syal felt a deep, deep pity for him then, but she knew he'd get offended if she tried to express it. So she just said, "Goodnight, LaRone."

"Goodnight, Syal."

She grabbed her blanket and lay down in the grass, facing away from him. A little while later, he turned off the glowlamp and they both went to sleep.

The patrol barge came when the planet was rolling into another long day and the sky was painted violet and pink by a slow, slow dawn. They'd just reached the fat strip of barren land that separated all those kilometers of grain fields from a patch of some other crop, and the automated landspeeder was

on them less than a minute after Brightwater spotted it in the distance.

That didn't give them much time to prepare, but by now LaRone's head was mostly functioning the way it should, and they'd already had several days of walking in a straight line to discuss scenarios of their first encounter with something besides grain-stalks. From that distance there was no way to tell if that barge had a sentient or a droid behind the controls, but for their first movements it didn't matter.

Grave dropped his sniper rifle from his shoulder and dropped to the ground on the edge of the wheat-field so that only the tip of his gun peeked through the dense stalks. LaRone, Quiller, and Brightwater dove all the way inside, totally hiding themselves from view. Marcross, leaning against his crutch, stayed out in the open, as did Syal. Neither of them had weapons, and they both waved their arms to get the patrol barge's attention.

Ten meters long and flat except for the storage shed on its rear half, the barge pulled to a halt in front of Syal and Marcross. Standing at the control panel at the helm was a long-armed droid with an oblong head balanced on an overlong neck. The droid tilted its head toward the two strangers and said, "Identify yourselves."

"We need help here," Marcross said. "My wife, and I, we're lost--"

"You are trespassing on the property of Polden Foodstuffs Incorporated. Under the Corporate Sector Authority Penal Code, Section 57, Subsection B.7, you will be--"

One shot from Grave's sniper rifle neatly severed the droid's head from its neck. The head went spinning off into the dirt. LaRone and Brightwater came out from the field and pulled themselves onto the barge's deck. Brightwater went straight for the control panel, pushing aside the droid's headless body as it stood frozen at the console. Grave came out of the grass and joined LaRone in kicking down the doors to the storage shed.

They went in with E-11 rifles raised but it was empty except for a few dormant angro-droids in one corner. When they went back onto the deck, Brightwater was helping Marcross and Syal aboard.

"Well, what have we got?" called LaRone. "Can we fly this thing?"

"Shouldn't be hard. Looks like this was designed for use by either droids or organics." Quiller said from the forward control panel. Someone had knocked the droid's headless body over and it lay pathetically sprawled on the deck.

"Best news we've had in days. Can you figure out where to go?"

"Just looking at a map now." Quiller waved him over and pointed to the console's largest screen. "You see this dot? This is us. And this thing in the northeast corner? That's an automated repair and maintenance node."

"Okay. What does *that* mean?"

"It means it has an independent comm system we can use to call for help."

"You're sure about that?"

"Best chance we've got right now. You want to set a course?"

"Absolutely. But will it be guarded by people? Droids? Anything at all?"

"I don't know. Once we get to the outskirts we'll have to do a recce."

"Okay. That's fine. Just put us in the right direction and we'll make up a plan as we go."

Quiller grinned. "Sounds like what we've been doing all along."

The ride took hours, but it passed without incident. It was so boring, in fact, that Syal took a nap in the rear shed, and LaRone might have dozed off on the forward deck if not for the wind in his face.

Once they got close enough, the so-called maintenance node was easy to spot. LaRone had been expecting a squat, plain build or two and perhaps some miniaturized transmission tower. What he got looked more like a small town centered around an antenna rising thirty meters high, situated atop the first ridge they'd seen after days on otherwise perfectly flat terrain.

They stopped the barge in the grass a full kilometer away from the complex and began scouting. Brightwater and Grave went on foot while the others remained on the

transport, scanning it via macrobinoculars. Quiller had predicted that it would be fully droid-operated and he seemed to be right. From the barge, at least, all the motion LaRone could spot were a handful of tread-mounted pallet-loader droids pilling large crates and an awkward stubby-legged gonk droid waddling around doing power readings. When Brightwater and Grave returned they reported the same thing: no organics in sight.

"That still doesn't mean there aren't security systems," Marcross said.

"And there could *still* be some people inside the buildings," added Syal.

"You're right, but there's only one way to be sure." LaRone gestured to the shed, where they'd dumped all the cargo they'd been hauling since the crash. "Everyone needs to suit up just in case. Stormtrooper armor and weapons."

"Are you sure that's necessary?" asked Syal. She probably didn't like it when they put on their white masks.

"It's best to safe. Marcross, you stay with Syal on the barge. If it looks like trouble, run."

"Run to where?"

LaRone thought about it for a second. "If it looks like trouble, get on your crutch, hobble in, and come save us."

"I like that better," Marcross said seriously.

LaRone turned to Quiller, Grave, and Brightwater. "Okay everyone, get your kits. Ten minutes, then we go."

It took them only eight minutes to get ready: everyone had been itching for real action for days. LaRone waved them into the grass without sparing any long goodbyes for Marcross or Syal; they'd probably see them again within the hour.

The four of them spread out as they moved through the grass. LaRone and Grave entered the complex from the southwest corner, Brightwater and Quiller from the northwest. As they moved, LaRone noted the design of the complex. It seemed very straightforward and mechanical, a square grid of five one-storey buildings on each side, except for the south end, where the entire space was taken up by what looked like a landspeeder garage. A two-storey structure, exactly four times the size of the normal buildings,

sat dead in the middle, and the antennae arose from the plot of ground right next to it.

They climbed out of the grass and marched up the hillside to the complex with rifles raised and ready to fire. A pair of loader droids kept going about their business and didn't seem to notice LaRone or Grave at all. Brightwater's voice crackled over his helmet, saying, "Does anyone else find this kind of creepy?"

"Just a bit," said Quiller. "These droids are walking around like we don't even matter."

"Now we know how *they* feel all the time," said Grave.

"Quiet," said LaRone. "Grave and I will check out the transmission station. You two, search that garage."

"Understood," said Brightwater.

LaRone and Grave kept their guns up as they went over to the comm station. If there were any organics at this complex, LaRone figured they'd be here. He stopped at the door, hesitated, then knocked on it.

"Really?" asked Grave.

LaRone shrugged. Nobody came. He waited sixty seconds and knocked again. Still on one. Grave looked over the door panel and said, "Looks like it'll need a security code."

"Can you override?"

"Probably. Give me a second."

As Grave pried off the panel and started working the wires, LaRone switched his comm channel and asked, "What's the sitrep?"

"One landspeeder in here," Brightwater reported. "Little dusty. Doesn't look like it's been used in a while. There's empty spaces for two more."

LaRone took that as a good sign. "Any droids decide you were worthy of their attention?"

"Nope. This place is fully automatic. They don't need wets like us."

"How humbling. Grave's getting us inside now. Go patrol the rest of the buildings."

"Understood."

It only took Grave two minutes to get the door open. Once inside, LaRone found the power switch and turned on the lights. There was an administrative office on the lower floor

with a desk and a few old datapads on a shelf, but it looked like nobody had used them in a while either.

Grave said, "My guess is they send somebody 'round here to check once a month. Or whatever passes for a month on this planet."

"I bet you're right. The important thing is we're clear." LaRone switched his headset channel again and said, "Marcross, you there?"

"Standing by."

"Everything is good. Bring the barge in."

"You found the comm station yet?"

"Working on it. Bring the package to the central building."

"Right. See you soon."

LaRone switched his helmet's external speakers on and asked, "Grave, you see anything that looks like a comm console?"

"In this room, I'm guessing."

He was already on the north end of the chamber, working the entry panel for another door. By the time he got it open, the others had already arrived. LaRone and Marcross went through the threshold first, into a small room lined with consoles.

"This make sense to you?" asked LaRone.

"Yeah, this is definitely a transmission station. Looks like it's set for long- and short-range broadcasts."

"Can we reach *Grey Wolf* from here?"

"Yeah, I think so." Marcross dropped himself into a chair and started working consoles. "Give me a minute."

"Take all the time you need." LaRone ducked back into the main room.

Syal stood between Brightwater and Grave, clutching her swelling stomach in both hands. She asked, "Are you going to call your grand admiral?"

"That's right." He wasn't going to ask her if she was okay with that. He liked her, but she didn't get a choice, not after all they'd been through.

"Then let's send it and get it going," said Brightwater. "The sooner we can get a pickup the better. They still might send some organics to patrol, you know."

"I know. We can't squat here indefinitely, but it's the best place to stay until help arrives." LaRone glanced back at Marcross, who was still working the console. They had to wait in silence for another few minutes before Marcross sat back in his chair and flashed them a thumbs-up.

"Okay, great," said LaRone. "Everyone in. The grand admiral wanted this message done right."

"Meanwhile what?" asked Syal, frowning.

"He wants you front and center. Probably wants to verify the package is in good condition."

She shifted uncomfortably but allowed herself to be prodded into the communications room. Marcross pushed his chair out of the way so the others could stand and said, "It's set to record. Lay down your message and I'll send it out. I've got the right identification codes plugged in so it should find *Grey Wolf*, wherever she is."

"Can you attach our coordinates to the data stream, so they know exactly where to pick us up?"

"Solar coordinates plus latitude and longitude, all plugged in."

"Great," LaRone said, and gestured for Syal to stand closest to the holo-projector while Brightwater, Quiller, and Grave stood behind her, identical in their white armor and masks. Before turning the recorder on, LaRone remembered the last bit of Thrawn's orders and pulled his helmet off his head. Then he stabbed the red button and stepped back so he was next to Syal.

"Admiral, this is the Hand of Judgment reporting," he said. "As you can see, we have the package in good condition. We've lost our transit offworld. We're secure for now but request pickup as soon as possible. Coordinates are attached to this data package."

LaRone snapped a salute; so did the the men behind him. Only Syal remained with her hands at her sides, looking surprised and a little confused, but it was good enough. LaRone stepped forward and killed the recording.

"And that's it," Marcross said. "Now all we have to do is send it."

"How do I do that?" LaRone asked.

Marcross pointed to a lit-up green button on the adjacent console. "Just a little push."

LaRone stood for a moment with his finger poised over the button. It had been a long messy journey to get here but the mission was ending as a success, with all his men accounted for. He didn't know how his luck stayed so good.

He felt relief and satisfaction wash over him. Then he pressed the button and cast their recording to the stars.

CHAPTER THIRTY

EMANCIPATOR

It was a sign of the influence Willham Burke had with Admiral Ackbar that the battle group he'd marshaled in the Quermia System was just as respectable as the one he'd put together for Bandomeer. The centerpiece, once again, was the captured star destroyer *Emancipator*. Alongside it were the Mon Cal cruisers *Mon Delindo*, *Mon Maria*, and *Mon Remora*, the Rendilli assault frigates *Haven* and *Refuge*, the *Neutron Star*-class bulk cruiser *Dilligent*, and a handful of Corellian gunships and corvettes for support. All of that, kept in reserve for a battle that would hopefully never happen.

Hiram Drayson was impressed and a little humbled by Burke's pull, but he tried not to vary his habits even though he's transferred his operations from *Home One* to *Emancipator*. He'd brought along a handful of aides who kept him informed of all the latest information fleet intel was dragging in, including asset tracking and skirmish reports from the various Imperial factions as well as the Republic. He also kept receiving status updates from Alpha Black, though it had been over a day since he'd gotten his last message from Dey'rylan, in which the Bothan had reported his arrival on Bonadan.

Drayson tried to keep up his other habits as well, including daily sessions in *Emancipator's* fitness facilities, which unfortunately weren't up to par with those on *Home One*. He was almost done with his fourth such daily session since their arrival at Quermia when he got an emergency call from Admiral Burke.

Drayson stepped off to the side of the track and fished the comlink from the waistband of his running shorts. "This is Drayson. What is it?"

"Hiram, can you come to my personal quarters right away?"

If the Imperials had come to Etti IV, the admiral would have jumped to whole battle group to hyperspace without calling him first. "Right now I could use a shower. How serious is this?"

"You can clean up first, but I need to see you right after that."

"All right. Give me twenty minutes."

Drayson would have preferred to finish his laps, but instead he showered, changed back into his uniform, dropped his gear off in his quarters, then went down to hall to Burke's nearby cabin.

The other admiral was reviewing some reports at his room's sole table, and he waved Drayson to sit down opposite him. "I just got an interesting call," he said. "It looks like Dey'rylan came through."

"In what way?"

"I just had a twenty-minute conversation with Sena Leikvold Midanyl. Does that name sound familiar?"

"She's Garm Bel Iblis' closest aide."

"Try to rein in that frown, Hiram. We may need Bel Iblis."

"What did she actually say? Is the old peregrine really willing to throw in his lot with us?"

"We had to negotiate some finer points, but essentially, yes. If we start tangling with Makati, and we call for help, they'll be standing by to answer."

Drayson crossed his arms over his chest. "But you didn't talk with Bel Iblis himself."

"I know you're skeptical."

"If he were really serious about rejoining the Republic he'd have spoken with you personally. You used to be his wing commander. If he'd shove down his pride and talk to anyone it would be you."

"You and Mon Mothma never really understood him."

"This isn't about me, or Mon Mothma. It isn't about him either. The Empire is crumbling apart and that's exactly why

all the old rebel factions need to come together. Once we kill Makati and Grant, Isard's holdings in the Core will be just one more rump state. A unified Republic will be the only *real* government in this galaxy. Anyone who doesn't join in that will be irrelevant."

"You're thinking pragmatically."

"We should all be thinking pragmatically."

"If we did, nobody would have ever dared challenge the Empire in the first place. Bel Iblis is an idealist. He really believes Mon Mothma is going to lead the New Republic down the wrong path."

"That's not idealism, that's an overweening ego."

Burke smirked and shook his head. "Are you sure *your* loyalties aren't clouding your judgment, Hiram?"

"All right. Enough. We've made the invitation and Bel Iblis has tentatively accepted. It's a good thing. I'll admit that. But we can't rely on him to save us."

"I'm not relying on anything except the ships I brought with me."

"Good. That's how it should be."

"And what about you? What's the latest from Bonadan?"

"I'm waiting to hear back from Dey'rylan."

"Makati should have arrived by now, unless he took a detour."

"He might have, to make sure he didn't run into any of Zsinj's ships. Or he could have set up a jamming field."

"Should we send a scout ship to Bonadan, just in case?"

Just in case meant *just in case Alpha Black failed and got themselves killed*. Drayson had tried very hard to keep his thoughts away from that possibility, but it wasn't his job to be sentimental. He had to be pragmatic and anticipate all outcomes.

"You've got a T-65r Recon X-wing aboard, don't you?"

"That's right."

"Then we might as well get her prepped. There's no point in taking chances."

Something didn't feel right. Soontir Fel had a hard time putting it words, maybe because he was afraid to. They'd been sitting for days at Quermia, waiting for some mission

that no one would explain. Most of the crew didn't know, but Wedge had told the Rogues that Leia Organa and Borsk Fey'lya were on Etti IV, negotiating with Corporate Sector officials. Given Quermia's relatively close location, it was a good bet their sit-and-wait mission was somehow connected.

That wouldn't have been worrying in itself, but there was more. That last conversation with Devin Torr before the intel agents and his cohorts disappeared had unsettled him. The man had known something and even been tempted to say it but had held back everything except vague hints. Fel didn't have the sense that Torr was holding back about Syal; instead it must have had something to do with the Corporate Sector. He'd always been unsure what Torr and his crew actually *did*, other than that they worked for Fleet Intelligence under Admiral Drayson.

And Admiral Drayson was aboard *Emancipator*. That was inexplicable, given that Admiral Burke was already their fleet commander.

He tried, very cautiously, to poke around about that. One time when he was eating in the mess with Nrin and Xarcce, he casually asked what they knew about Hiram Drayson.

"I don't know much," Nrin said as he slurped some mollusk out of a shell. "I understand he's technically in command of the Second Fleet, though he mostly does intelligence work."

"Burke and all the ships we've got here are from the Third Fleet," Fel reminded them.

"Then he's involved with intelligence work, probably related to activities in Corporate Sector," Xarcce said.

"It just seems strange to have two admirals on one ship."

"I understand Drayson left most of the field command for the Second to some of Ackbar's protégées," Nrin said. "Admirals Nammo, Kalback, Ragab. Capable commanders in their own right."

Fel didn't want to tell them about his last conversation with Torr. He wouldn't know what to say anyway. Neither Nrin nor Xarcce seemed worried; but then, they hadn't served a government loyally for years, only to be betrayed for the sake of political expediency.

Even after switching sides, that wound cut Fel surprisingly deep. It was making him too paranoid.

“Should Captain Celchu be on Coruscant by now?” Xarcce asked abruptly.

Fel blinked in surprise, then bobbed his head. “He should have arrived yesterday, I believe.”

“It was very brave, what the captain did,” said Nrin.

“You don’t need to tell me.” Fel looked down at his half-eaten tray. “I’d have gone myself, but they’d never let me near Coruscant...”

“I’m sure if anyone can find your wife, Captain Celchu can.”

Fel sighed. That was making him edgy too; NRI had nearly lost Syal to Isard once, and he couldn’t bring himself to completely trust anyone with her fate again, not even Tycho Celchu- former student, fellow defector, excellent wingman, but never quite a friend.

He looked back up at Nrin and Xarcce. Neither of them had been happy with his joining the Rogues at first, and Nrin in particular had kept lashing out at Fel in deflected anger after Ibtisam’s death. But all that lingering aggression and mistrust seemed to have finally dissolved since Tycho left for Coruscant. Somehow, his obvious grief and anxiety had finally made him one of them.

His eyes darted to Nrin’s tentacled face, then Xarcce’s oblong horn-rimmed head, then back to Nrin’s. In the beginning, too, it had been strange interacting regularly with non-humans. Today he’d been eating lunch with them for a half hour and only now did it strike him that they were both aliens.

He sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’m not hungry right now.”

“It is important to eat well and keep up strength,” said Xarcce.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Fel picked up his tray, carried it to the disposal, and left the mess hall. He felt restless and starting walking corridors for the sake of walking. It had taken him more than half a year and a lot of anxiety to finally start feeling comfortable with the other Rouges. He tried to image how it would be if he

stayed for another half-year. He wondered if he'd stop being paranoid by then. But he knew, deep down, that he'd never really feel comfortable fighting anyone's war until he had Syal with him again.

He eventually went over to the main hangar bay, where the Rogues' eight X-wings were sitting in order along the far wall. He walked beneath their long pointed noses, reaching up and running a bare hand along each one's hull. In his time with the Rogues he'd come to recognize each ship on sight; he could tell Nrin's by the black scorch-marks on the nose he'd gotten at Mindor, Xarce's by the pocks on the port S-foils from Axxila, Janson's by the red-and-yellow checker-board stripes instead of typical red ones.

He stopped by his own. It was clearly newer than the others, without the scorch-marks or battered hull plating. He'd taken it for a few patrols since Bandomeer but not yet into combat. The other fighters all had silhouettes of TIE fighters painted as kill markers beneath their cockpits; at first he'd objected to having those added to his fighter, but on Wedge's insistence he'd allowed it, as a show of solidarity with the other Rogues.

Nobody had bothered to paint his old kill markers on this new fighter. He wasn't sure if that was intentional; maybe Wedge was waiting for him to ask for his old kill markers, or maybe the score got wiped clean every time you lost a fighter. He'd never lost a fighter in his life before Bandomeer; he had no idea what was supposed to happen next. Maybe, with everything else going on, he'd been forgotten.

He was staring pensively at his clean new X-wing, uncertain of how to feel, when he heard the roar of an engine kick-starting. He looked around and saw *Emancipator's* sole Recon X-wing rise on repulsorlifts and vector toward the hangar's starry mouth. Flight crews waved it forward and its thrust engines kicked in. As the X-wing soared out of the hangar, Fel noticed Wedge Antilles' familiar form on the deck. When the ship disappeared from view, Wedge turned to look at the Rogues' fighters on the far wall. His eyes met Fel's across the distance. Fel gave his brother-in-law a short nod. Wedge nodded back and began walking toward him.

"Was that one of our pilots?" asked Fel.

Wedge shook his head. "I'm not sure who that was. Or where they were going."

"Have they sent out any recce flights before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Fel sighed. "This waiting is... frustrating."

"You're telling me." Wedge shook his head again and began walking beneath the row of X-wings, just as Fel had been doing.

Falling in beside him, Fel asked, "I don't suppose we'll hear anything from Tycho until he returns from Coruscant."

"I doubt it."

"Admiral Drayson is aboard, but he's not connected with that mission, is he?"

"I don't think so, no." Wedge didn't seem to notice he was angling. He stopped in front of his own X-wing. The kill markers for that ship had overflowed to both sides of the hull, and Fel noted the large circular marker for the second Death Star amidst all those rows of TIEs.

Wedge must have been looking at it too. He said, "Did you keep count in the 181st?"

"Many pilots kept track," he allowed.

"Did you put X-wings and Y-wings on your hull? Or was that against Imperial protocol?"

"For most units, yes, but for the 181st, they looked the other way." He didn't want to tell his brother-in-law that he'd encouraged the practice as a way to foster competition amongst his crew.

Wedge sighed and sat down on a rung of the ladder slanting up to his cockpit. "There's something I've been wondering about."

"Go ahead." Fel grabbed a stool and sat down across from him. The clamor of technicians on other parts of the deck seemed to fade to nothing, leaving them in intimate quiet.

Slowly, Wedge asked, "Do you think that of all the people on this ship, maybe in this whole battle group, anyone has killed more people than us?"

Fel stared at his downcast face. Any soldier who wasn't a sociopath sometimes felt sick at all the killing he had to do. For soldiers like him and Wedge, it was something they should have learned to repress a long time ago. They had to

accept their purpose in life: the fight and kill and die on the orders of others and trust that it was for a worthy cause. Otherwise they'd have never become the veterans they were.

"Dwelling on that," Fel said. "Can get you killed."

"I know. I've seen it happen to other pilots. And the Empire needs to be fought. I've never doubted that. But when I first started up, I guess I thought that one day we'd just *win*. Palpatine and Vader would be dead and we'd move into Coruscant and everybody would celebrate."

"Victories are never that clean."

"I know. But where does it *end*? If we ally with the Corporate Sector, fine. If we kill Grant and Makati and take Coruscant from Isard, that's good too, but we'll still have to deal with Zsinj and Teradoc and all the other warlords." He laughed dryly. "I don't want to do this my whole life. Which is a little funny. I guess, since I've been doing nothing *but* this for as long as I can remember."

Fel knew that for all their differences, he and Wedge both shared the habit of bottling up their doubts and frustrations. To some extent it was a necessity when you led other soldiers. The fact that Wedge was telling him all this now showed him how lonely his brother-in-law felt, and how much he'd come to trust him.

Fel tried to console him with optimism. "Once we find Syal, it will be different. You won't just be a soldier, Wedge. You'll be a brother again. You'll have a family."

"I hope so. I really do. But I haven't seen her in so long, I can barely remember—"

"It doesn't matter. She'll still be family. All we have to do is wait for Tycho to get back. He'll point us in the right direction."

"I hope so." Wedge's voice went cold. "If not... If Isard got to her because of NRI's screw-up..."

His hands balled to fists but he didn't finish. He probably didn't know how. Fel knew what it took to switch sides, and he couldn't picture Wedge doing that. He also knew what it felt like to grow disillusioned with the people you fought for, so slowly you barely noticed it at first. He could see that happening before him right now.

“There comes an hour for every good soldier when he must judge whether the cause he serves is truly worth his life,” Fel said. “That you’ve never had that hour until now, I suppose, proves that you chose a better cause than I did from the start.”

“The cause isn’t enough,” Wedge’s voice trembled. “For a long time, I thought it could be. But it isn’t.”

Fel agreed. Syal had taught him that and in a way, a much more difficult way, she’d taught her brother that too. In the end she’d bound them both together, and Fel knew that no matter what was coming, they’d be bound together still.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CORUSCANT

It had been years since Tycho Celchu had seen Coruscant's gleaming sphere with his own eyes, and he'd never expected to come back like this. The cockpit of his TIE fighter felt constricting around him, as did the tight black flight suit and breathing mask. The freighter he'd rode into the system on had dropped behind the far side of Coruscant's second moon before letting his TIE fighter slip out, out of sight of any orbital patrol ships. After that the freighter had casually slipped back into hyperspace, letting Tycho drive toward the capital.

His ship rattled him as it entered the atmosphere. White cloud-whisps flashed in his face, then peeled away. The swirling, luminous, planet-spanning cityspace swelled before him, gradually revealing its infinite detail. He vectored toward Imperial City itself, trying to spot the great pyramid of Imperial Palace from a distance. He watched his altitude, and when he reached the instructed height he leveled out his TIE and began his pre-set route. He'd placed himself at a comfortable location in the upper atmosphere, well above the lines of airspeeder traffic that cut through and above the city's skyscrapers but well below the patrol ships and skyhooks on lower orbit.

Tycho checked his sensor equipment, making sure it was on. The data-recorders didn't plug their feed directly into his console, so unfortunately he had no idea what they were picking up. He'd only get to see that after he'd landed and handed his data cores over to whatever NRI agents were

waiting for him. He'd spent so much time flying combat that he'd forgotten what it reconnaissance missions were like. It turned out they were shockingly boring, especially since he had no idea if he was even picking up useful data.

As he flew his circles over Imperial City he allowed himself to think that a trained monkey-lizard could have done this op, or one of Cracken's pilots, and that he really should back been back with Wedge and the rest of the Rouges. He chastened himself for that immediately; if he hadn't gone on this mission than Wedge would have insisted on going, and that meant *Wedge* would be the one wasted flying circles while the Rouges went into yet another dangerous mission.

He hoped one flight would be enough. He hoped he could drop off this data and get off Imperial Center and maybe he'd even get back on *Home One* before Winter. It would be nice to be the one surprising her in *her* cabin.

It was a warm thought, and it distracted him for a second when his scanners lit up with a proximity alert. When he spotted the little yellow light he snapped himself back into focus. There was an Imperial craft approaching, a high-altitude but atmosphere-limited Incom patrol ship. Tycho held his breath and switched on the beacon that would, NRI promised, identify him as a ship registered under the Imperial Center Planetary Survey Commission. That Incom ship couldn't chase him out of the atmosphere, but if he tried to run into orbit, it would surely call planetary security, and without a hyperdrive he'd have no place to run.

The patrol ship settled into a flight pattern parallel to his, two kilometers off his starboard side. He'd forgotten how limited visibility was in TIE fighters and he had to crane awkwardly in his spherical cockpit to get a good look at the ship as it kept pace with his above the clouds. He waited to be hailed, but nothing came.

Eventually the patrol ship broke off. He watched on his sensors as it fell further and further away. He realized then that he'd left himself drift off the course NRI had proscribed and turned around to cover the spots he'd missed. The patrol ship kept getting further away.

It was only after he'd righted himself and took his hands off the control stick that he noticed they were shaking. He took deep breaths of recycled air inside his helmet until he'd calmed down. He'd forgotten that sometimes these recce missions weren't so boring after all.

Isard had generously decided to let Octavian Grant review the correspondence passing between Imperial Center and Bonadan, which was how he knew Grand Admiral Makati's mission was not going as planned. Aside from the assassination attempt almost certainly orchestrated by Zsinj, it had become clear that wherever the Rebel councilors were negotiating with rogue CSA executives, it wasn't happening on Bonadan. Makati was trying to locate absent Direx members and Viceprexes, but the Corporate Sector had thirty thousand systems to look in, and the process was slow and awkward.

That was why Grant sought out Colonel Morrell. Isard was being more generous with information-sharing that time, but Grant still trusted old soldiers more than her. Over a quiet dinner at a forgettable mid-grade restaurant near Westport, Morrell explained that Director Isard had received a private message from a non-Imperial source somewhere in the Corporate Sector one day *after* she, Grant, Makati, and Thrawn had held their brief convocation at Bilbringi. ISB sources close to several breakaway warlords, including Zsinj, Teradoc, and Drommel, had reported that they, too, had received messages at the exact same time, presumably from the same source. Isard had made no reply to that message and it had not seemed to alter her actions in any way. The same could not definitely be said of any other recipients.

That was as far as Morrell could help him. Grant accepted his apologies and went straight back to his penthouse near Imperial Palace, where he sent out an encrypted signal to Temius Holt and hoped that trip to Ord Biniir would turn out to be worthwhile after all.

Holt hadn't been talkative since then, which made Grant pleasantly surprised when he got a prompt response. He was so surprised, in fact, that he didn't have a good idea of what he was going to say.

“Grand Admiral Grant?” the man said when his frowning face appeared on the holo-projector above Grant’s desk. “It’s been a little while. What are you calling about?”

It was nighttime in Imperial City now and assuming Teradoc kept his fleet synced to Coruscant Standard Time, odds were good that Holt was in his cups. Grant decided to play it rough.

“We have something very important to talk about,” he said seriously. “Is this a good time?”

“I suppose it will have to be.” Holt shifted his shoulders. “What’s going on, Admiral?”

An idea jumped to mind and he ran with it. “We talked about sharing critical intelligence at Ord Biniir. We talked about making deals that could help both our... patrons.”

“I know. We did. What are you on about?”

“As you may or may not know, Mister Holt, we’ve recently come into possession of some new hardware that gives us the opportunity to jumpstart a new offensive.”

The sudden gravity on Holt’s face showed that he’d heard about *Vengeance*. “How is this relevant to High Admiral Teradoc?”

Grant never knew whether to laugh or scowl at those pompous, unearned titles. “Director Isard has designated me to utilize our new hardware in a fresh offensive. She has decided that the Greater Maldrood Oversector will be the next place to receive punishment.

“Us? Teradoc never posed a threat to Isard!”

“He may not have set out to antagonize her like Zsinj, but he broke away from Coruscant and declared his own little empire. That alone makes him a threat.” Grant added darkly, “And unlike certain other warlords, Teradoc does not have any hardware to match what we’ve just gained.”

Holt’s face twisted into a scowl. “What are you offering?”

“A sneak peek of my invasion plan, of course.”

“And why would you offer that? You’d sabotage your own career. You’re probably just trying to shove fake plans off on me.”

It was true enough. Holt might have been a wastrel and a drunk, but he wasn’t stupid. “Frankly, Mister Holt, I’m not sure if this is an offer you can afford to refuse.”

“What are you offering it *for*? There’s a catch, I know there is.”

“What I want in exchange is relatively minor. I understand Teradoc recently received a personal transmission from the Corporate Sector, a transmission that was also sent to a number of other warlords.”

Holt’s face twitched. Grant knew he had something.

“I want to speak to whoever sent that transmission. You know who it is and how to contact him, don’t you?”

Holt’s face twisted into a smug little smile then. “Not a *him*, Grant.”

“Her, it, whatever. I need to speak to them.”

“And that’s what you’re giving your battle plan away for?”

Grant nodded. He didn’t actually have a battle plan to give away, but Holt didn’t know that, and if this paid off it wouldn’t matter if he burned his bridge with Teradoc’s intel chief. When Morrell had told him about the transmission from the Corporate Sector he’d thought of two things. One was Makati’s quarry; the other was Wynssa Starflare. A rogue agent could give him both.

Holt said, “I want to see those battle plans.”

“No. Get me in contact with the source of that transmission and *then* I’ll send you the plans. As a reward.”

“This is extortion.”

“I am an Imperial Grand Admiral and you’re a hanger-on to a bloated mynock with delusions of grandeur.”

Holt laughed bitterly. “All right. I’m glad we’re clear where we stand.”

“So am I. Give me the source.”

“Fine.” Holt reached down and punched something on his console. “I’ve attached it to this signal. Give her a call if you like. She seems to have a fondness for powerful old men, or maybe it’s the other way around.”

“Who is this *she* we’re talking about?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve had the pleasure of meeting Moff Leonia Tavira.”

Never met, but certainly heard of. It explained why Isard hadn’t replied. “*Former* Moff, you mean.”

“It’s hard to keep track of what she’s calling herself.” Holt shrugged. “I shouldn’t have to tell you not to trust her.”

"It's not my job to trust."

"Or mine. I want those battle plans, Grant."

"You'll get them if my conversation with Tavira is satisfactory. Grant, *out*."

She stabbed the button and shut off the transmission. As promised, Holt had sent him to code and coordinates to contact Tavira. Grant could have waited, had a something to drink, and reviewed the files Isard had thrown together on that little nymph, but energy was twitching through his body right now. He was finally making things happen and he was frankly kind of enjoying it.

He almost sent out the call right there; then he stopped and went back to his closet, where he changed out of the civilian outfit he'd gone to dinner with Morrell wearing and changed into his grand admiral's uniform. He didn't expect Tavira to bow to his authority, but he didn't want the brat to forget what he was either.

He punched in the coordinates and sent the call. His console told him contact had been made, but not one was replying. He waited for almost a full standard minute, just enough to feel disappointed, when a blue holo sprung to life over his desk, displaying the head and shoulders of a young woman with black hair falling to bare shoulders, large eyes, and the smooth round face of a child.

He'd known Tavira was young, but it had been a long time since Grant had had *any* conversation with a girl less than one-third his age.

That face frowned in confusion. "How did you get your message through?"

It took him a moment to realize what she meant. Makati had a localized communications filter in place over Bonadan's biggest spaceport, and only official CSA or Imperial frequencies were allowed to pass through.

"This is Grand Admiral Octavian Grant of the Galactic Empire," he said sternly.

The girl straightened and brushed hair from her face. "My name Captain Leonia Tavira. But I suppose you knew that if you went to all the trouble to call me."

"Indeed. I know you attempted to contact Director Isard several days ago, a contact she refused."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Is she desperate now? Is that it? I know your other grand admiral, Makati, has been down on Bonadan, trying to ferret out the secret Rebel meeting that's been taking place under his nose. He hasn't had any success."

"I'm quite aware of that. Am I to believe that you know the location of this meeting?"

She tilted her head back and put on an authoritative scowl. "I made an offer and was refused. Why should I reconsider my position?"

Grant realized he was watching a teenage girl doing a Ysanne Isard impression and wondered what he'd done to deserve it. "I did not refuse you, the regent did. Tell me, what did you do with this information? Did you offer it up for auction? Let all those warlords bid for your services?"

"I've already made one deal. I'm getting a star destroyer in exchange." She said haughtily. "What can you give me that will beat *that*?"

It was a damned good question. He couldn't, assuming she'd really found somebody who'd actually hand over a star destroyer to an adolescent sociopath. Of course, like attracted like, and given the character of many of the warlords he couldn't rule it out entirely.

"A star destroyer is quite a gift," he admitted. "Tell me, do you have it in possession already? Oh, no, of course not. You're stuck at Bonadan Spaceport Northeast II, I'm guessing. Three Imperial warships are sitting right above you and Grand Admiral Makati is parked right next door. Tell me, *Captain* Tavira, do you think I can't trace the exact location of this call? Do you think I can't comm Makati right now and tell him to drop a few turbolaser blasts right in your lap?"

He could see honest fear flash across her face, but she recovered quickly. "If you did that, you'd never find out where the Rebels are meeting."

"Very true. And fortunately for you, there's another reason I need you alive."

"What reason would that be?"

"Let me make a guess, Captain. You have no real connections with the Empire or even any warlord state.

You've become a pirate or a fringer and you've been laying about the Corporate Sector for the past few months, hoping to win a big score through use of your... renowned personal charm."

She smiled sourly. "Go on."

"I require use of your local connections to find a very important person."

"What person?"

"A stowaway. She sneaked a board a freighter at Corsin. That ship jumped past local flight control up the Hydian and skirted around the fight at Bandomeer en route to the Corporate Sector. A team of mercenaries went after her but have not been able to retrieve her. If you can help me acquire this person, I'll make sure it's worth you while."

"How so? I already have a star destroyer," she said, though he could tell he'd piqued her interest.

"Do you really? Because as I said, right now you're clearly stuck on Bonadan, and I can have Makati can turn your charms to glass if I decide to. Let me make another guess. You have the *promise* of a star destroyer. You got it from Zsinj or Teradoc, probably, and they said they'll give it over to you once they have the Rebel leaders in hand. Tell me, Captain Tavira, do you *really* believe that?"

He'd struck just the right nerve; for a moment her haughty resolve melted and she looked just like the brat she was. "A star destroyer *is* on its way."

"And you'll probably rendezvous with it and take it to wherever the meeting is really being held. And I'm sure you haven't told your, ah, *patron* the real location yet, because then he'd skip you and send his destroyer straight there, so he *has* to let you aboard his ship. At least, that was the plan before Makati put your whole port on lockdown. Do I have it all?"

Stubbornly, she nodded.

"In that case," he said, "I can ensure you get your star destroyer, and you will help me retrieve my missing person."

"How?"

"Captain, I am an Imperial Grand Admiral. I've spent my *life* on star destroyers and I have access to all the executive override control in the Imperial fleet."

“This ship isn’t part of *your* fleet anymore.”

“No, but that doesn’t matter. These codes were imprinted by the manufacturer. Most admirals and captains don’t even know they exist. Even if they did, overwriting them for an entire fleet would be prohibitively difficult and time-consuming. Face it, Captain, if you really want that star destroyer, I’m your only chance.”

She wanted to muster some rebuttal, but nothing was coming. He knew he had her.

“I think we have a plan now, Captain Tavira. You will tell me where those Rebels are really being held. Then you will go out and find where my fugitive is. Once you confirm that, I’ll inform Makati. He’ll return to his star destroyer and depart Bonadan, leaving you free to rendezvous with your patron. Then you will take that star destroyer and join me in claiming the fugitive. I will take the prize, and you will take your star destroyer and flit off to wherever you want to flit off to. Does that sound acceptable?”

“Why do you think I can find this fugitive?” she scowled. “Thousands of ships enter the Corporate Sector every day.”

“Yes, but very few will have departed from Corsin when traffic up the Hydian was on lockdown. And as I said, I’m sure a woman such as yourself has made many resourceful contacts in the Corporate Sector.”

“It’s still a long shot. Who is this woman and why should I find her for you?”

He stared at her smooth young face, still resolute. If he told her it would whet her appetite; it would also make her likely to grab Starflare herself and run for it.

“I am not the only one after the fugitive,” he said. “Other Imperial factions are close behind her. That is why I’m going to need your destroyer to help.”

That *your* *destroyer* didn’t mollify her. She repeated, “Who is she?”

Grant allowed a tiny shrug; he’d rather Tavira get the target than Thrawn if it came to that. “Her name is Wynssa Starflare. Perhaps you’ve heard of her.”

Tavira stared, and stared, and finally broke out into an earnest and terrifying smile. “I’ll do my best to find her, Admiral.”

"I'm so glad. But if you plan on leaving Bonadan, you'll need to give me the location of the Rebel conference."

"Of course," she nodded crisply, like she'd remembered how real Imperials acted. "They're meeting on Etti IV, on Viceprex Riga Lanchenzoor's estate."

"Thank you for your cooperation. I look forward to speaking with you again, Captain."

He turned off the holo and closed the transmission. After making sure further calls from that source would be routed to his personal comm station in *Oriflamme*, he went back to the refresher, washed his face, and straightened his uniform. Then he summoned a ride to Imperial Palace. He had to speak with Director Isard right away. It would be another tricky conversation, but he'd been having a lot of those lately and he'd been managing pretty well so far. He was almost shaking with excitement, something he hadn't felt in too many years to count. Against all odds, Grand Admiral Grant actually felt good about his future.

Well except for one thing. He'd forgotten how much he *hated* children.

Once his initial flight around Imperial City had been completed, Tycho proceeded as instructed to the industrial zone east of Imperial City commonly known as The Works. The glorious skyscrapers that were the capital's hallmark fell away, revealing kilometer after kilometer of smoking factories and ugly storage yards.

Tycho dropped altitude, flew his TIE low over the rust-scarred surface of the Works. He plugged in the map NRI had uploaded to the fighter's navigation computer and followed the markers to the mouth of a dark tunnel that seemed to wind into the base of a sprawling factory. It would be a tight fit; Tycho slowed his speed to a veritable crawl, turned on the TIE's forward spotlights, and began to work his way through the tunnel. It reminded him of the guts of the Death Star, and he tried to remind himself that this time, at least, he was flying a TIE and not running from one.

The dark tunnel seemed to wind on forever, but eventually he reached an expansive hangar facility. There were docking clamps for three TIE fighters suspended from the ceiling, all

empty. There appeared to be nobody on the flight deck and the only other vehicle he saw in the hangar was an old *Theta*-class shuttle that seemed to have been cannibalized for parts. He maneuvered his fighter into the docking clamps anyway and was surprised when they locked in place around his fighter. A gantry extended for him to climb out on, but he didn't see anyone until he scrambled down the ladder onto the flight deck.

Two beings had appeared there: one gray-haired human woman and one male Woostoid. Tycho pulled the helmet off his head and extended a hand to shake. The human introduced herself simply as Marya, the Woostoid as Shome.

"I covered the flight paths you wanted," Tycho said, combing his helmet-mussed hair with with one hand. "Your people can start working on it now."

"Excellent," the Woostoid, Shome, said. He took out a datapad and typed something in with long fingers. Tycho watched as an old starship repair droid rose up from one corner of the hangar on sputtering repulsors and rose slowly toward up to the docked TIE fighter.

"How long do you think it will take you to analyze the data?" Tycho asked as he watched the droid hook its mechanical hands into the data ports on the TIE's underside.

"Days, if we're being thorough," said Marya. "We needed that update on the planet's defenses badly."

"I know that, but what about the isotopic tracker?" He looked between her and Shome. "Cracken told you about that, right?"

"Don't worry, lad, we know," the old woman waved a bony hand. "That part should be easy to analyze."

"Okay. If you need me to make any more flights, anything to investigate that more closely, let me know."

"One pass should be enough," the Woostoid hummed as the tech droid detached itself from the TIE fighter and began a stuttering descent.

"That's good to know," said Tycho. "I have enough fuel in that TIE to fly back up into orbit and get a pickup whenever you call that freighter back."

"Of course, we'll do that," Marya placed a hand on his arm. "But *first* we'll go over the data you collected. It might be a

few days, so you should come with us. Lie down and rest. We can get you a bed, and some food..."

She sounded like a tender grandmother. As Tycho followed her to the door on the far side of the hangar he asked, "How many people do you have at this storehouse?"

"It's just us, I'm afraid," said Shome as he shuffled along with them.

"I see. So do you use this place as a safehouse? A storage facility?"

"Hmmm... You could say all three."

"So our other agents in the capital use it too, then."

A look passed between Marya and Shome; both their faces creased with restrained frowns.

Tycho laughed nervously. "You can't be the only agents left in Imperial City, can you?"

"Lad, I'm afraid we don't get many visitors nowadays," said Marya.

"Oh," Tycho swallowed. "That explains a lot."

He realized it was a stupid thing to say as soon as it was out, but they didn't seem to mind. If anything, that old man and old woman just seemed pleased to have someone new around. It was the most depressing thing he'd seen since coming back to Coruscant.

Octavian Grant knew he stood a risk going to Isard with what he'd discovered. The woman was no fool; even if he didn't tell her where he'd learned of the conference's location, she'd have to at least suspect he'd spoken with Tavira. Makati had already shaken her trust by going behind her back to talk with Thrawn; that their collaboration had produced spectacular results didn't heal the wound.

But if Grant managed to get her both the Rebel leaders *and* Wynssa Starflare, she'd hardly refuse.

"Are you sure of this, Octavian? Absolutely sure?" Isard asked as she paced around him. They met in her chamber deep within the Palace again; two crimson guards stood by the entrance, watching the show through their unreadable masks.

"Madam Director, what we *do* know is that they aren't on Bonadan. And Makati included Lanchenzoor on his list of

Viceprexes who were missing and might by sympathetic to the Rebel cause.”

“He also said the ExO had spoken with her. She was visiting production facilities on Lythos.”

“It’s easy to reroute a comm signal and hide the source of origin. Madam Director, let me take *Vengeance* to Etti IV.”

She tilted her head back and did that condescending, imperious look much more effectively than Tavira had an hour ago. “You’d steal Makati’s victory? And all this time I thought you were getting complacent in your old age.”

Maybe he had been, but right now he felt at least a decade younger. “Let me do this, Madam. We can signal Bilbringi right away and have Captain Sysco take *Vengeance* outbound. I’ll go into orbit, grab *Oriflamme* and *Implacable* and meet up with him. We’ll cut together through Zsinj’s territory and get to Etti IV as fast as possible.”

“And Makati?”

“I’ll let you inform him, Madam Director.”

She snorted amusement. “Then I won’t keep him waiting long. If your two fleets mees above Etti IV, Octavian...”

“I wouldn’t dream of battling Makati for the prize,” Grant said, and he honestly didn’t. He wasn’t Grunger or Pitta. “But together, Madam Director, we can make sure the Rebels don’t escape. And *Vengeance* can make her impressive debut.”

“You paint a lovely, dramatic picture, Octavian. I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you.” He gave a little bow, then steeled himself for the hard part. “I have one other thing, Madam Director.”

“Go on.”

“When I was speaking to my contact in the Corporate Sector, he said that he’d found indication that Baron Fel’s fugitive wife had entered that region of space.”

“Wynssa Starflare?” Her red-blue gaze widened. “Does your contact know *where*?”

“I’m afraid he was just repeating rumors. There was some chatter that she’d slipped in on a transport outbound from Corsin.”

Isard regarding him carefully. “And how did your contact find this information?”

"I can't say." Grant shrugged and held out his hands. "Clearly, though, this bears investigation. Unless you already have agents tracking her."

A brittle smile formed on her face. "Octavian, I think you should ask your agent to look into this further. If you can get me Wynssa Starflare alive, I will make sure you're well rewarded."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"And also, Octavian..." She paused for a second of uncharacteristic hesitation. "I believe others may also be close to finding Starflare, others claiming to represent the Empire."

"And if I should encounter them?"

"Make sure they don't get our prize."

"Thank you, Madam Director." Grant smiled and bowed again. "That was exactly what I wanted to hear."

Grey Wolf was approaching the edge of the corporate Sector now, after skirting carefully clear of Warlord Zsinj's territory, and they still hadn't received any update from the Hand of Judgment. Captain Niriz was frankly growing quite alarmed, because the freighter LaRone and his people were tracking should have arrived days ago.

If the grand admiral was concerned he hid it well. Niriz went back and forth in his head on when, how, and whether to force a confrontation with Thrawn about finding Starflare some other way, or even admitting defeat and handing the hunt back to Isard. He still trusted the grand admiral, of course, but his miscalculation at Ruusan had proven that Thrawn wasn't infallible after all, and that he sometimes needed a good captain standing by to correct his mistakes.

That was something Niriz would have felt awkward explaining, though, which was why he went back and forth in his head without deciding how to confront Thrawn.

In the end, the grand admiral was the one to call him to his personal quarters. Niriz found Thrawn seated in his command chair as usual, only instead of analyzing some recreated art objects he was observing a star chart that Niriz quickly recognized as a map of the Corporate Sector.

"Welcome, Captain." Thrawn waved him forward. "I believe we are nearing the end of our wait period."

"Does that mean LaRone's finally contacted us, sir?"

"It does indeed." Thrawn tapped the keypad on his chair. The star map shrunk to the side and a new image appeared in its place. A video started playing; the image was grainy, probably having been magnified from a much smaller original, but Niriz could see three white-armored stormtroopers, plus another trooper in front with his mask off. Despite the grainy image, he recognized the face as Daric LaRone's.

"Admiral, this is the Hand of Judgment reporting," LaRone said. "As you can see, we have the package in good condition." He placed a hand on shoulder of the woman with short dark hair standing next to him. It was a little hard to tell from the poor image, but she seemed to have a pregnant swell at her belly. "We've lost our transit offworld. We're secure for now but request pickup as soon as possible. Coordinates are attached to this data package."

Niriz looked at Thrawn in relief. "Is that it, sir? Do we have them?"

"They've marked their location on Orron III." Thrawn tapped his keypad and the map grew large again. Niriz spotted the green triangle marking their location, and the yellow circle denoting Orron III. Unfortunately, they were on opposite sides of the map.

"I'll order helm to increase speed at once, sir," Niriz said.

Thrawn held up a finger. "Not yet. There's something I need to do first."

"What's that, sir?"

Thrawn tapped the keypad again and the starmap zoomed out further. A red dot marked another system on the bottom right corner of the map, outside the Corporate Sector but far closer to Orron III than they were.

"I've reestablished contact with Akharan," Thrawn said. "He's given me some useful information, including the location of a Rebel battle group at Quermia."

"Quermia? Sir, do you think they're planning to *attack* the Corporate Sector? But why?"

Thrawn gave a sigh. "I have an apology to make, Captain."

"Sir?" Now Niriz was simply confused.

"Yes. I've been exchanging information with Grand Admiral Makati behind Isard's back. And yours, because I wanted you to have deniability in case the Director was feeling wrathful."

"Ah," Niriz said, and nothing else. He wasn't sure what else to say except, possibly, *thank you*.

"In any case," the grand admiral continued, "Grand Admiral Makati is attempting to hunt Rebel leaders in the Corporate Sector, but it seems they're hunting him also. Naturally, we'll assist him." Thrawn paused, but before Niriz could speak he added, "Akharan has also informed me that Baron Soontir Fel is aboard that Rebel fleet at Quermia."

"Sir... Do you think you can capture him at Orron III too?"

"It's a hard chance to turn away. If Rebel intelligence learns we have Starflare, they may place Fel on lockdown to keep him from going after her."

"Can the Noghri help us with that, sir?"

"I believe so. But first we must wait and see what fleet at Quermia has planned. For now, Captain, plot us a course to Di'an. I'll contact Makati in the meantime."

"I'll relay the order right away, sir."

Thrawn steepled his hands in front of him, almost hiding the tight smile tugging his lips. Niriz had no idea why he was smiling; it seemed like everything seemed poised to spin out of control at any moment.

"It's rather artistic in a way, isn't it Captain?" Thrawn sounded wistful. "All those disparate pieces have come together in this unlikely place on the galaxy's edge, and now they're all waiting for a single spark to set everything in motion. Fools might think whoever makes the spark has the advantage, but they're wrong. The advantage belongs to those who can see how all the pieces fit together and predict where they'll go."

"Do you believe knowledge wins wars, sir?"

"Captain, you should know by now I've never believed anything else."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BONADAN

Over the past few weeks Fenn Olith, former first officer of the star hauler *Trivigaunte*, had come to the inescapable conclusion that the universe hated his guts. He'd suspected that for a long time, especially during his year-long tenure aboard Phelan Waylox's ship. The gig on *Trivigaunte* had looked decent enough at first, well-paying and low-stress, but he'd quickly grown sick of his boss. Waylox paid a good wage but in exchange his employees had to put up with constant criticism, micro-management, and stern orders that got reversed on a whim. And in the end the fat idiot had gotten himself killed thinking he could out-bluff an Imperial stormtrooper, which Olith might have found satisfying if not for the fact that losing his boss meant he lost his job too, because as it turned out, Phelox Shipping Incorporated was heavily in debt to several CSA subsidiary companies, and with its owner deceased, all the assets, including the ship and its cargo, went to repaying that debt.

As a result, Fenn Olith had found himself unemployed and derelict on Bondan's biggest spaceport town. The one advantage to this was that he had spare credits in his account and plenty of drinking establishments to waste them in. When he was on the fifth or sixth stop of his cantina-crawl he found himself sitting at the bar-counter talking to a small, young, black-haired female wearing a scarlet dress that was high on the bottom, low on the top, and probably didn't leave much room for respiration. He was Etti and she was human, but that was close enough.

Fenn Olith was not an ugly being, but he was not a looker either, so he figured out pretty quickly what this human girl wanted from him. When he'd mentioned that he was out of work, he'd expected her to slink away and find somebody with a fatter wallet, but instead she stayed and pressed him as to how he'd ended up in this sorry state. He didn't understand that, but he'd been a long time without female company so he kept answering her questions.

"Wasn't it awful, seeing your boss killed?" she said, visibly wincing.

"Oh yes," lied Olith, "Absolutely terrible."

"You poor man." The girl put a hand on his arm. "Why did they break into your ship? Were they pirates?"

"No, not pirates. They wouldn't be interested in us anyway. We were just carrying agro-droids and industrial farming supplies."

"Then why did they do that?"

He took a long gulp from his cup of surprisingly-good local brew. "I shouldn't say."

"But why not?"

"I've, ah... Got a feeling my story shouldn't get around."

"I know how to keep a secret," she leaned in a little closer and lowered her voice. "People tell me all kinds of secrets."

"I'm sure they do," he smirked. If she really wanted a piece of his limited savings he was feeling inclined to give them to her.

"Why do you think you should keep it quiet? Did somebody threaten you?"

"It's just that when the Epos showed up, they didn't seem interested in asking questions. In fact, I tried to tell them what had happened, but they didn't even take notes. Of course, I guess it makes sense..."

"But what *happened*?"

He had no idea why she was so curious, but he found he couldn't help himself. "All right. I'll tell you. But you have to promise not to tell anyone else."

"I promise." She whispered.

"Okay." He put a hand on her shoulder, drawing her a little closer. "Back on Corsin, we picked up a couple stowaways. A man and a woman."

"Really? What did they look like?"

He blinked. "A man and a woman. Human. The man had dark skin and the woman... Ah, she was pregnant. Waylox, my boss, he thought they were running away from family on Corsin or something, but I wasn't sure. The man...."

When he trailed off she pressed, "What is it?"

"The man had two blasters on him, and in his pocket, he had this identification card with an ISB logo on it. You know, the Imperial Security Bureau."

She covered her hand and gasped. "The *Empire*?"

"And when his friends came after us... They were *stormtroopers*. Stormtroopers boarded our ship. Waylox, he thought he could bluff his way past, the idiot, so they shot him. They took the woman and the man and ran for it." He grabbed his glass and emptied it. "A CSA patrol corvette caught them trying to run. Shot them down. They fell right into the planet."

"Oh," she breathed, "They're *dead*?"

"Of course. I mean, I assume, I don't know. But don't you get it? They were Imperial agents, probably really important ones, and the Epos *shot them down*. Now they're trying to cover it up so the Empire doesn't get any more mad than they already are."

He waved a hand at the ceiling, indicating the warships that had been sitting right over the spaceport for days, blocking all transmissions and halting all traffic.

"Oh, you poor man." The girl leaned in close and ran a hand through his hair. He turned his head and planted a kiss on her bare shoulder; she didn't move away.

Her breath tickled his ear as she asked, "What kind of ship did they have?"

"Their ship?" He'd been expecting the next question to be about something else entirely.

"The ones who shot you down."

"Umm... It was Mandalorian. One of those L-shaped enforcer ships, the kind mercs and bounty hunters use. But that was probably their cover or something."

"Oh, I know those. Those are tough ships."

"You know ships?" She hadn't seemed the type.

"Where do you think it crashed?"

“Umm... We were over the... northwest hemisphere, I think. But they chased that ship around a lot before they knocked it down.” He picked his head off her shoulder. “Why are you asking?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Then she pulled her hand from his hair, leaned back, and hopped off her barstool.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I’ve got all I need.”

“What do you mean?” Olith frowned as she turned for the exit. “Hey, wait!”

She waved a hand and sauntered out the door. He watched her go but she didn’t even look back. When she was gone Olith heaved a very long sigh and called for another drink.

Clearly, the universe really did hate his guts.

At this point, Leonia Tavira was pretty much convinced that the Force, luck, or some abstract universal deity loved her. She’d needed a way to guarantee that she could take over *Invidious* once she got aboard, and then Grand Admiral Octavian Grant had called her out of nowhere and offered a deal that would let her off Bonadan and even get her that star destroyer for sure. She’d decided quickly that being sultry or coquettish wouldn’t work with Grant and had decided to act stand-offish and reluctant instead; the old man probably thought he’d had to force her into it.

Then he’d given her a second way to help herself: Wynssa Starflare. At first she’d doubted the odds of finding the ship she’d come in on, but Billibango had been able to slice into CSA security files and found the incident report from Orron III. Those Espos really had skimmed on their investigation, implying it had all been some pirate raid, but they’d at least named *Trivigaunte*’s late owner and former first officer. Billibango had sliced into the port registry next and learned that Fenn Olith had disembarked from a passenger liner just eight hours before Grand Admiral Makati showed up and put everyone on lockdown. Actually finding Olith in the space-port’s massive urban sprawl had been the hardest part, but between Tyrac’s Force powers and Tavira’s own tools of persuasion, they’d found him and gotten what they needed in the end.

It was still possible that Wynssa Starflare had died in a horrible fireball slamming into the endless grain fields of Orron III, but Tavira didn't believe it. Luck, the Force, or the abstract universal deity wouldn't have taken her this far for nothing.

So she went back to the landing pad and climbed cheerily back inside *Courtesan*. Tyrac must have sensed her coming with his Force powers, because he intercepted her when she was halfway to her cabin.

"Mission successful?" he asked.

"They crash-landed on Orron III, northwest hemisphere."

"They survived?"

"They had a tough Mandalorian ship and I bet a good pilot behind it. They made it."

"Well, that's great, because we might get our chance to run."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, let's go the bridge," Tyrac turned a corner and waved her to follow. As they rode up the short lift tube to the command deck.

The bridge was the busiest she'd seen it since before the lockdown. She went straight to the side display screen, where Billibango was playing live feed from four of the port's security holo-cameras.

"What's happening?" she asked, "Is Makati on the move?"

"No, but something's going on," Wukh jabbed a claw at the top left image. Crews were moving around the DX-9 transports that had brought Makati's extra staff down.

"Anyone around the grand admiral's shuttle?" she asked.

Billibango shook his small round head. "Not yet. Comms are still mucked too."

"This is the most activity we've seen since they arrived," Tyrac said beside her.

"I know. What about the Rebel agents? Are they moving?"

"Not yet," said Billibango. "I think they're- wait, I see them!"

The Xexto tapped at his keyboard and filled the screen with the full image from the security camera watching the YT-2000 transport they'd tracked the rebels to. Two dark, furry Bothans slipped out of the landing deck.

"They must be seeing the same thing we are," said Tyrac. "They might even know more, if they found a way inside the CSA complex."

"The Imps must be pulling out," Wukh grunted.

"And the Rebels think they can get another chance." Tavira put her hands on her hips. "All right. Wukh, run pre-flight diagnostics but don't start the engines until we're sure Makati's leaving. Rossk, Levran, go shadow those Bothans. Billibango, stay on those cams and track them as far as you can. And Van—"

"Yes?"

"Head for their ship. I want one of them captured and brought back here."

"Sure thing, Captain." Tyrac grabbed the gunbelt he'd left on a nearby console and strapped it to his hip. He gave Tavira and up-down look and added, "Nice dress, by the way."

"Van, shut up. Just remember that these agents are probably trained to resist interrogation. That means we'll have to use alternative methods. Be ready for it."

He nodded seriously, then turned and followed the others off the bridge.

By the time Isard had contacted him directly, Grand Admiral Makati had well and truly given up on ever finding the supposed Rebel leaders hidden anywhere on Bonadan. By then it was abundantly clear that they were somewhere else, but he still hadn't pinned it down. He'd watched as ExO Leon had personally commed Viceprex Lanchenzoor on Lythos, ostensibly to ask about CSA finances. They'd also gotten Security Viceprex Lyq Varn to contact Malor'dacan and ask for an update on weapons manufacturing. Makati had also tasked the ISB to look into comm traffic on Go'thal's homeworld of ZeHeth, hoping to tell whether the Prex was or was not on the planet, though he hadn't heard anything conclusive. He knew that if he poked and prodded any more he'd stir the rebels from their hiding place and send them running.

But then Isard called him on a secure line, tight-beamed from Coruscant to *Steadfast* and from *Steadfast* down to the

CSA headquarters complex. She'd explained that, based on new Intel, she now believed that the Rebels were meeting with Viceprex Lanchenzoor on her estate grounds on Etti IV, and that she'd already dispatched Grand Admiral Grant with *Vengeance* to assist in their capture.

For Makati, it felt like relief and anticipation at once. First he told his ground troops to begin loading the DX-9 transports in a standard evac procedure. Then he ordered F-4GR to go down to the bunker and fetch his personal belongings, then commanded four of his stormtroopers to seize the nearest small shuttlecraft in the main civilian docking area. They were to communicate with internal helmet comms only and give the local security personnel no warning.

When they'd sprung into action, ExO Leon had been furious, saying that Imperial troops had no legal right to seize property on a CSA planet and that he'd file a very, very strenuous complaint with Director Isard. Makati had clarified, saying that, *one*, he was only borrowing it and would send it back to Bonadan on autopilot once he was done, and *two*, he didn't trust Leon's Espos not to shoot him in the back or sabotage the shuttle he'd come down on.

Makati had decided soon after the assassination attempt that the best way to have potential enemies learn your plans was to not have plans until they were absolutely necessary. As a result, the process of four stormtroopers commandeering an unstaffed Trianii RX4 light patrol ship had taken all of ten standard minutes. It took another five for two more troopers to drive Makati and F-4GR in a shielded land-speeder to the port complex and escort them into the belly of the Trianii ship. Five minutes after that, with two stormtroopers at the helm, they lifted off and soared skyward. The other stormtroopers would retrieve the grand admiral's personal shuttle and the two DX-9 transports on their way out, but Makati had no problem waiting. He was glad to leave Bonadan behind; when he saw *Steadfast's* pale wedge grow ahead of them, it felt like a homecoming.

When he arrived on he safe, familiar decks of his star destroyer, Captain Vivant was there to meet him in the landing bay. As they made their way to the bridge, with two guards and F-4GR shuffling along, Vivant gave Makati a

thorough update on the ship's status. As the rode the lift up to the bridge tower, Vivant lowered his voice and said, "There was also a signal like the kind you mentioned."

Before going down to Bonadan, Makati had warned Vivant that they might be receiving a heavily encrypted transmission from an unidentifiable source. "When did it come through?"

"Just an hour ago, actually. I couldn't transfer it down to the planet, and when I tried to comm you they said you were occupied."

"It's all right, Captain. I'll go straight to my personal cabin and return the call."

"Very good, sir. I'll make sure your comm system is prepped."

"Thank you."

When the lift doors opened, Vivant went straight for the bridge. Makati walked more slowly toward his cabin. Beside him, F-4GR said, "I have to admit, sir, I'm quite glad to be off that world."

"So am I, Forger."

"I see. So you did not enjoy your return to Bonadan?"

"Why would I?"

"I see your point, sir. It's just that I've been told organics often feel a sense of nostalgia when visiting places where they've spent many days."

"What do you know about nostalgia, Forger?" His mind was on the call waiting for him, but he found himself curious.

"Nothing first-hand, sir. At least, I don't think so, though I do sometimes access memory files created on Cartao when you were young."

As they reached the door, Makati stopped and looked at his droid. "And? Do they feel different from yesterday's memory files?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, sir. Memory files are memory files. My cortical systems suffer no degradation, so the files from Cartao are just as detailed as the ones from yesterday."

Makati gave no reply. Unsettled, he opened the door and went through. F-4GR followed him into the cabin while his guards waited outside. He wondered what it would be like to remember his childhood as vividly as F-4GR did. He'd be

able to recreate in his mind his family, or Cartao before the Clone Wars ravaged them both. The thought made him shudder. No, he didn't envy the droid, not a bit. He didn't want his life to be more ghost-haunted than it already was.

He shoved all that aside and went over to his comm system. As Vivant had promised, it was ready to return the call. He sent a signal and waited less than a minute before a holo-image sprung up in front of him.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn," Makati nodded. "I apologize for the delay. I returned your message as soon as I could."

"There's no need to apologize. I know you were busy with important tasks on Bonadan."

"I was wasting my time. I've just been contacted by Isard. It seems the rebels have been on Etti IV all the while. I just hope I'm not too late to catch them."

"I see. Then you should be advised, Admiral, that they're not alone. According to my sources, the rebels have amassed a battle group at Quermia. It seems to consist of one star destroyer and three Mon Cal cruisers, plus support vessels."

Quermia was a short jump from the Corporate Sector via a transit route that led easily to Etti. Bitterly, he said, "They're still laying traps."

"It appears so."

"Thank you, Admiral. I'll take that under advisement."

"Do you intend to spring that trap?"

"I have no choice. If I don't the Rebels will escape. Grant is coming with reinforcements. I only need to hold over Etti IV and prevent them from escaping until he arrives."

Thrawn's bright eyes stared at him, alien and incomprehensible through the holo. Makati added, "I've fought off their tricks before. I can do it again." He didn't know if he believed it, but he had to tell it to himself.

Thrawn didn't see like he believed it either. He said, "I do not doubt your combat skill, Admiral, but you seem to be heavily outnumbered."

"I will hold Etti IV and wait for Grant to come. Then we can capture their leaders and destroy their fleet. I only have to hold."

Thrawn stared for another long moment, then said, "There are more wars to be fought than just this one. I'll be

returning to what you call the Unknown Regions shortly. I have allies there, beings I can trust, and together we are forging order and stability from chaos and war.”

Makati didn’t believe what he was hearing. “Admiral Thrawn... Are you offering me a *job*?”

“Many good servants of the Empire have joined me already. As I said, there are more wars to fight than this one.”

It sounded preposterous: running off with an alien warlord he barely knew to fight with a bunch other aliens and Imperial renegades against unfathomable threats in uncharted space. Then he thought again, and laying down a siege while holding off a whole Rebel fleet with just two star destroyers seemed just as absurd. Of the two, it sounded even more likely to get him killed.

But running was running, and he’d never done that in his life. “I’m sorry, but I already have my fight against the Rebels and the warlords. I can’t abandon the Empire to them. The center must be held.”

Thrawn’s alien face betrayed nothing. “Very well. Perhaps we’ll speak again on this subject later.”

“Perhaps. But for now, I must go to Etti IV,” Makati said, then added. “Thank you for the warning. And the offer.”

“Goodbye, Admiral.”

“Goodbye.”

Then the holo shut off. Makati drew a deep breath, then turned to face F-4GR’s motionless metal face.

“We are committed,” he said.

When that Trianii patrol ship had roared off from the landing pad and soared skyward, Reyhan Dey’rylan had instantly known that they’d failed. They’d spent days gathering snippets of conversation passing through the CSA headquarters complex and planning ways to sneak back to the grand admiral’s landing pad and make sure they nailed him before he got into his shuttle, all the time overlooking the obvious fact that a grand admiral could have gotten off Bonadan any way he damn well wanted.

Disappointment was fierce, but Dey’rylan shoved it back down where it belonged. It just meant they had to fall back on Plan B.

As Karr and Ekrhine threw on their stormtrooper armor, Kasck and Dey'rylan dashed out of the ship and began retracing the route they'd taken into the executive wing of the landing complex days earlier. Devin Torr, still in civilian garb, followed behind them, just far enough away to avoid attracting attention. Given the lockdown the port had been in for days, there wasn't much foot traffic, any by staying in under-used corridors they avoided notice entirely. Because of the low crowds and limited time, they decided to skip the waste extraction tunnels and utilize a service stairway leading up to the walkways that connected the main civilian landing complex to the executive wing. Dey'rylan had already sliced through those controls once and got through it faster a second time. Torr waved them ahead, then slipped back into the main complex. Kasck and Dey'rylan hurried across the catwalks and into the executive complex, this time taking an only slightly different route to get to the pads where the DX-9 stormie transports were being loaded.

They scrambled through the shadowed overhead catwalks and quickly scoped the scene. It looked like most of the stormies had yet to arrive. Dey'rylan turned on his comlink and said, "We're in position. Report."

"I'm in place too," said Torr. "Jekk? Sho-tev?"

"Coming your way," the Em'liy grunted.

"Suited up?" asked Dey'rylan.

"Dressed up for the dance," Karr said. "You see an opening?"

"If we get a distraction. Torr, any more stormies heading your way?"

"Not yet, but it can't be long."

"Okay. Then we hold tight and wait for them to move." Dey'rylan shut off the comlink and looked at Kasck. "Get ready."

The other Bothan nodded and looked over the edge of the catwalk. It would be a good jump down to the landing deck, but Bothans were agile and could manage heights. Dey'rylan just hoped Torr's distraction would be enough to get two Bothans and two guys in white armor onto those transports. Karr and Ekrhine could disable two stormies and take their place easily enough; two Bothan stowaways would be a lot

tricker. Dey'rylan and Kasck both knew the awful risk they were taking, the strong likelihood that the ship up to *Steadfast* was a one-way ride. Dey'rylan never claimed he wasn't afraid of dying; right now, though, pure adrenaline wiped out any existential angst. Deep down, he *needed* to get aboard that ship, just as he *needed* to take Grand Admiral Makati down. After all he'd done to get this far he couldn't walk away.

His comlink buzzed, and Torr said, "Incoming stormies. Full dozen, coming through the main promenade."

"We'll take the back two," said Ekhrine.

Dey'rylan took a deep breath and waited, paws wrapped around the edge of the catwalk, ready to swing down. He exhaled, inhaled again. Then the explosion went off. Rather than the sharp tang of exploding bomb or grenade it sounded like an awful metal tearing, followed by the howl of ejected gas, which was exactly what it was. Torr had placed a small charge right onto a fuel conduit running along the ceiling over the promenade. Right now, all those stormies were getting doused with potentially explosive fusial thrust vapor.

The landing facility had droids and automated safety systems to deal with such emergencies, but the noise was enough to bring every able-bodied stormtrooper running out toward the sound of the explosion. Dey'rylan and Kasck dropped down behind the closest DX-9, landing on the pads of their feet. Backs low, the two Bothans kept in the shadows as they raced up to the rear cargo loading hatch. Kasck drew out two of his poison-tipped throwing needles and stuck his head in the hatch, but it was empty except for a few metal lockers, each one meter long by two wide. It seemed they had some luck after all.

As they crawled between those crates and the bulkhead, thoroughly concealing themselves from view, Dey'rylan turned on his comlink and whispered, "We're in. Report."

"Just got splashed with anti-combustant by a cleanup droid," said Karr. "This stuff smells *awful*."

"At least you'll fit in with the others. Sho-tev?"

"Ready too, boss. Swapped out helmets so we're on the same comm freq as the rest of the squad. With all that gas blowing around nobody noticed the exchange."

“What about the originals?”

“I took care of the bodies,” Torr spoke up.

“Good job. Find a place to hide until we’re all in the air, Devin. Then get back to the freighter. Tell Drayson to jump to Etti IV right away and warn Fey’lya too.”

“You sure that’s where they’re going?”

“No point in taking chances, not any more.”

Dey’rylan heard heavy footsteps on the landing pad. The stormies, after a slight but messy delay, were getting on their transports. Karr asked, “Which boat are you on, Boss?”

“Furthest from the entrance, aft cargo hold.”

“Great. We’re on the same one. Hold tight where you are.”

“That was the plan.”

Dey’rylan heard heavy boots walk around to the rear of the transport. He didn’t dare stick his head out to look, but he knew some stormie must have been giving the aft cargo hold one last look-over. He didn’t breathe, didn’t do anything until the door slammed shut, sealing him and Kasck in utter darkness.

“We’re locked in tight,” he said into his comm.

“In the main cabin now,” Karr reported. “Everything’s go.”

“Sorry I’ll have to miss the dance,” said Torr, as jauntily as he could. He knew as well as they did how bad the odds were that they’d ever see each other again.

“Just let Drayson and Fey’lya know,” Dey’rylan said.

“Will do, Boss.” His voice went serious. “Good luck up there.”

His comlink clicked off. The shuttle began to whine and rattle around them as its engines warmed up. Dey’rylan heard Kasck shift in the darkness.

“I just wish we could have smuggled some guns aboard,” the other Bothan muttered.

Dey’rylan smacked the crate in front of him. “I’m not. If we can’t get some now there’s plenty more waiting for us on *Steadfast*. More guns that we could ever need.”

“I don’t mean guns pointed at me.”

“Well... *Now* you’re being picky.”

After a moment of hesitation, Devin Torr decided to leave the bodies of the two stormies in the maintenance closet he’d

helped Ekrhine stuff them into. It wouldn't be too long before somebody discovered them, but he fully intended to lift off the moment *Steadfast* jumped out of the system. Granted, a lot of other ships in the port probably had the same idea, but that just meant the staff would be too busy to check maintenance closets for a while.

As he hurried back to the YT-2000 as fast as he could without full-on running, Torr's only regret about it was that he'd forgotten to raid the stormies' kits for useful material. Granted, they'd been in a rush, and the weapons detectors in the port complex would have started screaming if he'd tried to nab a gun, but Torr had been an Imperial once and he knew stormtroopers carried tools and gadgets for just about any occasion.

It was a minor regret, though. A part of him also wished he was going with the rest of his team to *Steadfast*. He knew somebody had to stay behind and warn Drayson, but that gnawing part of him felt like a coward for not going with them.

They all knew that going up to *Steadfast* probably probably meant they'd never coming back, but nobody had complained. Nobody had even mentioned it. As the trotted back to the lading pad with their freighter, Devin Torr discovered he was humbled to have worked with all those brave beings.

He didn't know how he was going to live with it. He had to fire up the comm and warn Drayson first. He'd run halfway up the landing ramp when he realized he shouldn't have been on the landing ramp at all. Ekrhine and Karr should have closed the landing ramp when they'd left the ship unmanned. Maybe they'd forgotten because they were in a such a rush, but people in their line of work didn't last long forgetting to lock doors.

Torr didn't have any blaster on him, but at least he had a knife and Kasck had taught him some pretty good throwing tricks. That wouldn't stop a pistol but it was all he had. He drew his knife from its hip-sheathe and carefully held it by the swelled tip of its pommel. He took another slow, careful, silent step up the landing ramp, then another. He peeked his

head inside and looked to his right, then his left. The freighter's main corridor curved in either direction, empty.

Then he heard footsteps behind him and spun around. A man was standing at the base of the ramp; a horizontal scar beneath one eye gave him a fierce look. Torr raised one hand to throw the knife-

-and a stun blast caught him in the side. The knife fell harmlessly from his numbing fingers and clattered down the landing pad. Gracelessly, helplessly, he pitched forward and tumbled after it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ETTI IV

Leia Organa's sense of disquiet had been slowly growing ever since the sudden departure of Fey'lya's aide. Fey'lya had explained to the CSA representatives that Dey'rylan had had to return to Bothan space after less than two days at the conference because of a family emergency. He'd repeated the same to Leia in private, but Winter had confirmed Dey'rylan had been an intelligence operative for Admiral Drayson.

Winter said she didn't know why Dey'rylan had left or where he'd gone, and Leia chose to accept that. Still, nothing had unusual happened the first day after his disappearance, nor the second, nor the third. Better still, the negotiations were going better than Leia had hoped. Viceprex Dright's initial shows of skepticism had gradually eroded and he'd started to suggest potential reforms for the Security Division, once they got Viceprex Lyq Varn replaced with someone more pliable. Viceprex Malor'dacan seemed enticed by the idea of contracts and collaboration with New Republic industrial engineers who would be much more innovative than the staid old ones working for the Empire. Prex Go'thal had even agreed to chart a draft reform of the CSA's territorial management system that would make planetary governments more accountable to a century authority, while at the same time increasing local say in central government.

Still, despite all the good progress, she'd never been able to shake her unease.

The conference at Etti IV had been planned according to a specific schedule that would allow the CSA representatives to return to Bonadan with ExO Leon and Imp Advisor Maloc none the wiser, and while the deadline had added focus to the negotiations, it also meant that they were running out of their allotted time and had a lot of plans left to either finalize or set aside for another conference at a yet-to-be-determined time. Everyone wanted to finish as much business while the momentum was strong, and that meant the conference's last day was jam-packed with important decisions to be made.

When she woke up that final morning in her still-so-luxurious room, Leia knew her thoughts should still have been swarming with final questions to ask, offers to propose and deals she might have to accept. She went down to the dining hall to discuss them with Fey'lya, but even as they started talking she couldn't stop thinking about Reyan Dey'rylan.

Abruptly, she stopped Fey'lya in med-sentence and said, "I'm sorry, Borsk, can I ask an unrelated question?"

Fey'lya's right ear twitched in irritation. "If you insist."

"When your aide left two days into the conference, what exactly was his explanation?"

"His father had come down sick with nal'ragic fever. It's a very nasty disease. We've been able to stamp it out on Bothawui, but Dey'rylan comes from a colony world, and the health conditions on them can be... less than optimal."

"I see. Did you speak with his family to confirm this?"

The fur on his face bristled slightly. "Is there a reason you're asking this, Princess?"

"I've been curious. He left so abruptly, and I was surprised someone new to the diplomatic corps was appointed to such an important mission."

Fey'lya sat back and just looked at her, like he was deciding how much to say. Before he could open his mouth, though, they heard a knock on the door and both turned to see Winter walk into the dining room. Her white hair spilled unbraided over her shoulders and she wore a plain gray tunic instead of the formal gown she'd previously used for the talks; that was Leia's first sign something was wrong.

Leia shifted to face her. "Winter, what is it?"

"We just received a message from Admiral Burke with the Third Fleet."

"What did he say?" asked Fey'lya.

"He said that he's been monitoring ship movements in the Corporate Sector... And apparently two Imperial star destroyers and an interdictor just left Bonadan."

"Bonadan?" Fey'lya rose to his feet. "Why were they at Bonadan in the first place?"

Winter clasped her hands tightly in front of her, the only sign of nervousness. "Sir, according to Admiral Burke, those ships belonged to Grand Admiral Makati."

"Makati?" Now it was Leia's turn to jump up. "Where did he go?"

"Burke doesn't know. But he warns they *might* be coming to Etti IV."

"Might be," Fey'lya echoed bitterly. "If we scrap these negotiations now we'll lose everything. We're so *close*."

"If Makati's on his way we need to run," Leia insisted.

"And if he's not, then we've thrown away everything for nothing." Fey'lya hissed and looked at Winter. "Is Burke still at Quermia?"

"That's right. He wanted to know your response before bringing in his forces."

"If he brings a whole fleet to Etti IV, the CSA will declare it a violation of their territory. They might even send a fleet of their own to respond. That will kill the negotiations too."

Leia began, "If Makati is coming for us—"

"Then Burke will probably be too late anyway," Fey'lya waved a paw. "Our only options are to stay and finish these talks or run and throw away everything on the *chance* Makati knows we're here."

Leia had no answer; neither did Fey'lya. Both stewed in angry indecision while Winter watched the councilors impassively, waiting for someone to make the call.

Finally, Leia said, "We can tell Burke to move his ships over the border and sit outside the Etti system. He has more than enough ships to take Makati's three, assuming Makati even comes here."

"And if the grand admiral decides to blast this estate from orbit the second he leaves hyperspace?" asked Fey'lya.

“Maybe we can truncate the negotiations. The schedule-”

“Is too packed already.”

“Then we cut something. And be ready to leave the second talks are over.”

Fey’lya’s fur bristled. “You want to find a middle ground, a compromise.”

“I *am* a diplomat,” Leia said with a nervous laugh. She wasn’t even sure if she’d been joking.

The Bothan gave a feral growl and flexed his retractable claws in the air. “Don’t the Corellians have some saying? You can’t own your nerf and eat it too?”

“Ryshcate,” Leia correct. She’d heard Han say it often enough. “It’s a kind of cake.”

“In my experience, they’re right.”

“Then what do you want, Borsk? Stay and risk it? Or run and give up everything?” She really wanted to know. She had no answer herself.

Fey’lya growled again, then fixed his piercing violet eyes on hers. “Let’s see if we can shrink that schedule. And tell Burke to cross the border and attract as little attention as possible. Then we’ll pray the Corellians are as foolish as I always thought they were.”

Courtesan was currently plunging through hyperspace en route to its promised rendezvous with Teradoc’s star destroyer *Invidious* on the edge of the Corporate Sector, but in its forward cargo hold you could only tell it from the faintest vibration in its deck and the distant hum of its power generator. Despite the Marauder corvette’s age and checkered history, Tavira’s crew kept it in prime condition, far better than most of the CSA picket ships which it frequently imitated.

Still, their captive must have been attuned to hyperspace travel, because as he sat bound in his chair he asked, “Where are we going?”

“Nothing that concerns you,” Tavira said honestly. She didn’t intend for him to be alive when they met *Invidious*.

His captors had given him a minor thrashing after taking him prisoner, and a few dark bruises were still swelling on his face, but the captive’s eyes were alert as he scanned the

other beings in the room with him. Rossk and Levran stood on either side of the door, while Tavira and Van Tyrac stood two meters dead ahead of him.

"What is your name?" asked Tavira.

"Darth Vader."

"Be serious."

"Afsheen Makati."

Tavira took two steps closer. "You think you're being clever. I guess that's expected for a Rebel agent."

He flinched, just a little, then looked at Tyrac. "You've got an interesting crew here. A Trandoshan, a Yakka, and a tart."

"This is *my* ship," Tavira stepped closer.

"Really?" He looked her over. "Nice dress."

She slapped him, hard. He winced and licked blood from his lip. "Okay. Nice arm strength too."

"You were shadowing Makati. What happened to the rest of your team?"

"Who are you, anyway? You're not Imps. Pirates? Mercs? Bounty hunters?"

"What can you tell me about Etti IV?"

"Etti what?" he asked, after a tiny second's hesitation. She knew she had him.

She looked over her shoulder and gave Tyrac a sweet smile. "Van, I think we require your talents."

"Gladly." The scarred man walked over to the prisoner and knelt at this side. He reached out and placed the tips of two fingers on the man's forehead, just below a bruise.

The prisoner winced and said, "What is this, some weird kind of torture? Poke the bruise until it bleeds? I was expecting you to start chopping off fingers."

"We know Rebel agents are trained to resist torture," said Tavira. "However, I'm sure you weren't trained for this. Let's start at the beginning. Your name?"

"Grand Moff Tarkin."

Tyrac tapped his forehead again and closed his eyes. The prisoner's eyes fluttered, as though trying to blink away unwelcome thoughts.

Tavira asked once more, "Your name?"

His mouth opened slowly and his lips trembled. Stuttering, he said, "Devin Torr."

Eyes still closed in concentration, Tyrac nodded.

“What happened to the other members of your team? Two Bothans and two dressed as stormtroopers.”

His lips squeezed shut, like he was trying to keep words from pouring out. Tavira leaned a little closer. “Did they get aboard those shuttles? Are they on Makati’s ship right now?”

His lips didn’t move, but his head bobbed up and down in an affirmative nod.

“I thought as much. Now tell me about Etti IV. You know about the Rebel conference there, don’t you?”

He nodded again, though his whole neck strained and his face went red, as though he was trying to keep his body from betraying him.

“You set a trap for Makati. You tried to lure him to Bonadan with false intel. We know your Bothans tried to kill him when he arrived. But you failed. Now Makati is on his way to Etti IV and he’ll capture the Rebel leaders.”

Tyrac’s eyes were still closed, but he muttered, “There’s more.”

“Is there now? What *else* is at Etti IV?” She reached out and cupped Torr’s trembling chin in her hand. “More Rebel assassins?”

“No,” Tyrac muttered. “Something else.”

“What else? A fleet, maybe? Is there a fleet waiting for Makati at Etti IV?”

Torr’s shaking lips opened again. He rasped. “Go... kark... yourself...”

Tavira slapped him hard again, knocking Tyrac’s hand away. Torr’s eyes popped open and he gasped for breath. Blood trickled unnoticed down the broken bruise on his cheek.

“How... How did you that?”

“As you indicated before,” Tavira said, “I have a diverse crew with special talents.”

Torr turned his fluttering gaze on Tyrac. “You... Jedi?”

“Not quite. I was raised by a group called the Jensaarai.”

“Never heard of ‘em.”

“They began as a small splinter sect. The Empire oppressed them, like usual. But I got away.”

“You don’t... seem... Jedi-like.”

Tyrac shrugged. "I'm not much of a Jensaarai any more either."

"Van found a much more profitable use for his skills here in the Corporate Sector," Tavira said.

"I'll bet," Torr shook with laughed that turned into a hacking cough.

"He's still hiding things," said Tyrac.

"I'm sure he has plenty of secrets in there. If only we had time to plunder them all." Tavira crossed her arms under her breasts. "Is there anything recent, anything else we might be able to give Grant?"

"I sensed something about the fleet." Tyrac closed his eyes and tapped the prisoner on the forehead again.

"Go kark yourself," Torr repeated.

This time Tavira ignored it. She crouched low, putting herself on eye-level with the prisoner. "Can you tell how many ships are with the fleet?"

Torr's lips sealed tight again, but Tyrac muttered, "Looks pretty big... I sense... a star destroyer..."

"Makati has two of those, and Grant more on the way." Tavira said thoughtfully. "Is it somebody *with* the fleet?"

Torr made a growling sound seed in his throat. Tyrac nodded just a little, urging her on. She asked, "Who is leading this fleet? Who is the admiral?"

Torr's stuttering lips said, "Burke... Admiral Burke..."

The Third Fleet, Tavira thought, mildly disappointed. She'd been hoping for Admiral Ackbar himself. "Who else?"

Torr's incisors sunk into his lower lip in an attempt to keep more words from being churned out. More blood ran down to his chin but it wasn't enough. Stuttering, he said, "Drayson... and... Rogues..."

"Rogue Squadron?" Tavira scowled. "You mean Antilles, Fel, all of them? They're all with the fleet?"

Torr tried to bite down on both lips to keep from talking, but Tyrac shook his head and whispered, "Not all of them."

"Then who? Is Baron Fel with them? Will Baron Fel be at Etti IV?" The prisoner's head shook in another affirmative nod. "And Wedge Antilles, is he there too?" The prisoner nodded again.

Tavira remembered the battered face of the man who'd been her prisoner on Axxila, the one who'd escaped and called down the rest of his Rogues and wrecked Kavi's Corsairs so badly she'd barely made it out in one piece. "What about Tycho Celchu? Is *he* with them?"

Torr trembled but didn't speak. Tyrac shook his head, a negative. Tavira felt honest disappointment. The thought of Grant and Makati wiping out the troublesome Rogues for her at Etti IV was so enticing she felt tempted to go there and herself and watch it first-hand.

"What a great shame. What happened to Celchu? Please tell me he'd already dead."

Tyrac's brows pressed together in concentration as he tried to draw one last bit of information out of Torr. His lips parted, baring angry blood-streaked teeth. They chattered as he said, "C-C-Coruscant..."

"What?" Tavira's eyes went wide. "Celchu is on Imperial Center? Right *now*?"

"S-s-spy... ship... TIE... fighter..." Suddenly he started choking. His eyes popped open and his head jerked back. Tyrac withdrew his hand but it was too late. Torr's body jerked once, twice, then went still. His mouth hung open and his lifeless eyes stared up at the ceiling.

"I pressed too far," Tyrac stood and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"No. No, Van, you gave me just what I needed." Tavira felt a wide, vicious smile on her face. "If you'll excuse me, I have a call to make."

When she left the cargo hold she ran to her cabin as fast as her dress would let her. When she got there she turned on the communications console and patched in the direct line to Grand Admiral Grant. She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed her old Moff's uniform from its hook on the wall and threw it on. Maybe he'd be a little less sneering if she had it on.

She made the call, but had to wait nearly two full minutes before the old man answered. Grant's head and epaulet-topped shoulders appeared in front of her.

"Well," the grand admiral sniffed, "If you're calling me I guess it means you're off Bonadan."

"My ship is currently en route to meet the star destroyer *Invidious*. My little gift from High Admiral Teradoc. And you're going to make sure I get what he promised me."

"Have you found Wynssa Starflare?"

"I have."

"Tell me where she is."

"Not until I have *Invidious*."

"I'm not giving you something for nothing, girl."

She decided to try an innocent smile. "Admiral, I just want to make sure I can trust you, especially when there's so much else I think we can share."

Grant's brows drew together. "Such as?"

"I may not have any official standing in the Empire and more, Admiral, but that doesn't mean I want to see the Rebels win on Etti IV."

"Makati and I are both on the way there now. You have nothing to worry about."

"I hope so. I just wanted to make sure you knew there was a Rebel fleet waiting for you."

His eyes widened. "How did you learn this?"

"We captured a Rebel agent stalking Makati on Bonadan. We may even have saved the grand admiral's life, but you don't need to thank me."

"An agent? Do you have him now?"

"Unfortunately, no." She sighed regretfully. "You know interrogations can be rough. He did give up some valuable information before he died."

"So it seems."

"But that's not all, Admiral. He knew that Rogue Squadron will also be there, including Baron Fel."

"Hmmm." Grant frowned. "If he dies before we recover his wife, then our little bargain will be null."

"I agree, though I'm sure Fel wouldn't be easy to kill. Still, I thought you should be aware."

"I appreciate your information," Grant said thoughtfully.

"There's something else I learned from. It seems another Rogue Squadron flier, Tycho Celchu, is currently on a spy mission on Imperial Center."

"You're sure of this?"

"Yes. He's apparently flying a captured TIE fighter."

She'd normally have been loathe to give Isard a free tip, but for Tycho Celchu she made an exception. People who down-talked revenge clearly hadn't done it right.

Grant snorted again. "You must be very good at interrogations if you got all that out of him."

"One of my lieutenants is uniquely skilled. I hope all of this shows my good faith."

It had better; she'd told him everything except the part about those Rebel assassins on Makati's ship. She'd been tempted to tell him that too, since she had no ill will for the grand admiral, but Grant had let slip that he'd be joining Makati on Etti IV, at least for a start. If Makati were killed, command of the fight would fall on Grant, making it harder for him to extricate himself. Tavira still hoped to get to Orron III and snatch Wynssa Starflare out from under him. She could only imagine what prizes a second auction would get her.

Grant looked away, thinking. "I suppose we can reach some... compromise."

"I'm open to one." She hoped it would be enough; they were due to meet up with *Invidious* in under an hour.

"All right, girl. I don't suppose you know whether your new ship is *Imperial I*- or *Imperial II*-class."

Tavira opened her mouth, then found herself without reply or rebuttal. She smiled to cover her embarrassment. "I'm afraid not."

"Such a pity. Still, I can give you basic advice. Before you lock the captain and crew out of the ship's main computer cores, you'll need to have your own people at key locations in its infrastructure in order to make sure they can't manually override weapons, drive, or navigation systems. Can your people do that?"

"They're quite capable."

"Good. First you're going to need a crash course in star destroyer design. Are you ready to listen carefully, girl?"

She nodded attentively like a student at in a lecture hall. "Go ahead, sir."

Octavian Grant's long outbound ride from Imperial Center to the Corporate Sector had proven more interesting than

expected. After meeting up with Captain Sysco's *Vengeance*, Grant had quickly transferred his flag to the super star destroyer and, together with Captain Bremel on *Oriflamme* and Captain Trigit on *Implacable*, continued cutting through Warlord Zsinj's territory toward their target. He'd hoped Tavira would comm him after Makati left Bonadan with Starflare's location in hand, but he'd expected attempts to barter favors instead of a straight answer. He certainly hadn't expected this news of Rebel fleets at Etti IV and Rebel agents spying on Imperial Center.

He'd gone straight to Isard with the news, once again withholding the source. The director seemed quite pleased, and promised she'd ferret out the Rouge Squadron spy in the capitol at once.

After that he had to make a trickier call to Grand Admiral Makati. As he stood in a spartan private chamber that must have belonged to the late and unlamented Jerec, Grant summoned an encrypted connection with Makati's *Steadfast* and brought up a holo-image so both grand admirals could speak face-to-face.

"Thank you for contacting me," Makati said. "I'm inbound to Etti IV now. Director Isard informed me you are too."

"With *Vengeance*, yes," Grant nodded. "You should reach the planet first."

"I thought so."

"You should know that the Rebels have laid a trap. They've arranged a fleet to meet you at Etti IV."

"I already know," he said, which took Grant by surprise. He'd only waited a few minutes after calling Isard to contact Makati, and it was possible she'd passed on that information to him that fast, but not probable. It made Grant wonder where Grand Admiral Thrawn was, and if he'd been in contact with Makati also.

"Given the size of my task force," Makati was saying, "I intend to lower my destroyers into the atmosphere and launch an attack on Viceprex Lanchenzoor's estate. *Tenacious* and *Constrainer* will remain in outer orbit and hopefully be able to pull the Rebel fleet out of hyperspace far enough away from the planet to give me time to capture Fey'lya and Organa."

That told Grant two more surprising things. One: Makati had to know which direction the Rebels would be coming from to pull them out of hyperspace away from the planet. Since neither Grant nor Isard knew, that almost surely meant he was still getting secret help from Thrawn. Two: He was willing to sacrifice both *Tenacious* and *Constrainer* to complete his mission. Makati was not a man who threw away his men's lives for no reason.

"Admiral," Grant asked, "Do you have an estimated time for your arrival on Etti IV?"

"Approximately six hours."

"At our rate we'll be there in ten. If you can hold out for four, I can make an end of it with *Vengeance*."

Makati nodded grimly. "I'll let the crews know relief is coming. Thank you for telling me."

It sounded like he wasn't expecting any relief from Thrawn. Grant pondered pressing about the third grand admiral's whereabouts but decided against it; showing his own ignorance would gain him nothing.

"Is there anything else?" asked Makati.

"Not for the moment. I look forward to seeing you at Etti IV."

"Likewise. Goodbye, Admiral Grant."

The holo shut off, leaving Grant alone in the quiet darkness of Jerec's old chambers. Once he'd found pleasure in claiming dead enemies' homes but now it felt ghoulish. He didn't like super star destroyers in general and he didn't like this one in particular. He'd considered not going to Etti IV at all and instead taking *Vengeance* off to wherever Starflare was, just to make sure Tavira or Thrawn didn't scoop her up instead. Then came the news about the Rebel fleet waiting to spring its ambush. Enough of Grant still believed in what the Empire supposedly stood for to wince at the thought of abandoning a loyal grand admiral to a larger Rebel fleet, but he wasn't ready to give up Starflare either; not to a teenage trollop and certainly not to an alien interloper. Once he arrived at Etti IV he planned to transfer his flag back to *Oriflamme* and trust Captain Sysco to ride to Makati's rescue. With *Vengeance*, he should have an easy time of it. So Grant hoped, anyway.

On Corellia they had a saying about how you couldn't have your slice of ryshcate and eat it too. Grant had never been sure if it was true, but since he couldn't bring himself to chose one over the other right now, it looked like he was going to find out.

The procession that stepped off *Courtesan* and into *Invidious*' main hangar bay was surely the most motley assemblage that had ever set foot on that star destroyer. First came Rossk and Levran, hulking muscled aliens with jagged knives strapped to their belts and T-21 heavy assault rifles slung casually off their shoulders. Then there was Van Tyrac, looking almost swashbuckling with the rakish scar on his face and a long-blade vibroknife and DL-44 blaster pistol on either hip. Then, for good measure, came four battered old Neimoidian battle droids from the Clone Wars, rifles formally held against their metal chests. And finally, with a rifle-toting Nikto guard on either shoulder, was Leonia Tavira. She was over a head shorter than anyone else in the line, but she thought she made up for it with the imperious old Moff's jacket she'd thrown over her short red dress and the blaster holstered at either hip.

The expression on the face of the lieutenant in charge of the greeting party was priceless.

As her guards fanned out on the deck, Tavira stepped right up to him- he couldn't have been five years older than her- and said, "Please, we'd like to speak to your captain."

The lieutenant licked his lips nervously. "Captain Morux is on the bridge."

"Then please, take me to him."

"Ah, Miss, ah-"

"Call me *Captain* Tavira."

"Yes, Captain. Ah, Captain Morux instructed me to make sure your personnel were disarmed before coming board, captain."

"And why would he do that?" Tavira put on an innocent, confused look. "We're supposed to be partners, aren't we? That's what Treuton promised."

"Treuton? Ah, High Admiral Teradoc. I'm afraid I'm not privy to your dealings with the High Admiral, Captain."

"Well, he promised a partnership." She crossed her arms and pouted. "If Captain Morux isn't going to comply, or if Treuton ordered him to go back on his deal, then we'll take our information right to Grand Admiral Zsinj."

The lieutenant grimaced in consternation. Whoever had thought they could send this boy down to handle her had been sorely mistaken.

"I'm sure there will be no problem at all if my people come aboard, Lieutenant," Tavira said, and glanced sideways at Tyrac. He'd said that, even without touching, he could still give subtle suggestive nudges with the Force.

The lieutenant said, "You're right. I'm sure I misheard. My apologies, Captain. I'll escort your party to the bridge."

"Thank you for being accommodating," Tavira smiled sweetly, and signaled for her people to start moving.

As the lieutenant moved them down the star destroyer's halls, Tavira let Tyrac go ahead and begin engaging the young man in conversation. She dropped in between two rows of battle droids, far enough away from her stormtrooper escorts that they didn't notice when she subtly brushed one cheek and tapped the audio transmitter in her right ear that was veiled from sight by the black hair framing her face.

So softly only the droid guards could hear, she whispered, "Billibango, report."

"I've made a connection between *Courtesan's* primary cortex and their landing bay's computer," the Xexto slicer's tinny voice replied. "From here I should be able to access the rest of their systems."

"Make sure they don't catch you."

"Don't worry, Captain, I'm the best." Billibango sounded eager for the challenge.

"Good. Keep working."

She tapped off the earpiece with another casual motion as the lieutenant led them into a large lift carriage that shot them toward the destroyer's stern and finally took them up to the command tower.

When the blast doors slid open, every last crewman turned to stare at Tavira and her entourage. One broad middle-aged man with captain's bars started stuttering objections as well-armed Niktos and a hulking Trandoshan swaggered onto his

bridge, but Tavira barely noticed. Her eyes swept over the entire scene: the broad command deck, the twin pits packed with uniformed officers and the broad aisle down the middle, leading straight toward the transparisteel viewports that looked out on a panorama of twinkling stars.

All her life, Leonia Tavira wanted to stand on the bridge of an Imperial star destroyer. She'd dreamed of it, imagined it in vivid detail, lusted for it in a way most beings reserved for beautiful mates. Ignoring everything else, she walked down the bridge's center aisle until she could see the glorious mile-long stretch of off-white durasteel and bristling gunports that was *Invidious*.

For the first time in years, the expression of childlike joy on her face was totally honest.

A sharp voice pierced the haze, insisting, "This is outrageous! Absolutely outrageous!"

Tavira took a deep breath and turned around. The captain was glowering at Rosk and saying, "This is the bridge of an Imperial star destroyer! We do *not* allow sub-human trash to parade around with weapons and—"

"If you have complaints, you may direct them to me," Tavira said.

The man spun on her. "I am Captain Hollis Morux and this is *my* vessel. I cannot allow your... your *pets* to parade around with—"

"I heard you the first time, Captain," Tavira said. "I came to an agreement with Treuton. This ship was to be my payment for giving you Borsk Fey'lya and Leia Organa. Has Treuton decided to renege on that deal without telling me?"

"Not to my knowledge," Morux grumbled. He winced every time she used Teradoc's first name.

"Until Treuton does, you need me and my crew. Now please, plot a course for Orron III."

"Orron III? Are the rebels hiding there?"

"Of course. Why else would we go there?"

"Orron III is an agro-world run by droids. There are barely any sentients on it."

"What better place to hold a secret meeting?"

Morux's face colored red and twisted in interesting shapes as he tried and failed to come up with a rebuttal. Finally he

turned and called, "Helm, plot a course to Orron III. Jump when ready, maximum speed!"

As the helmsman gave an affirmative, Morux looked back at Tavira. "I suppose you know exactly *where* on the planet they'll be hiding?"

"Naturally. I'll tell you when you need to know. Until then, I hope my men can make themselves comfortable on your ship."

Morux passed a baleful look around the bridge, pausing to scowl at each of Tavira's crew individually, even the old droids. None of them seemed impressed.

Finally, he said, "Very well. But they'll be accompanied by guards at all times."

"Fair enough. Now, I've never been on the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer, Captain." She gave Morux a wide-eyed look and said in an innocent voice, "I'm sure I won't understand half of it, but while we're on the way to Orron III, can you *please* give me a tour?"

Leia and Fey'lya were experienced diplomats with plenty of experience keeping their sabacc faces during tricky negotiations. The CSA representatives weren't fools either, and halfway through the hastily reorganized final talks, Lankar Dright finally decided to ask, "Councilors, is there something you want to tell us?"

It took Leia and Fey'lya aback. Mokka Falanthas covered for them, responding, "We've already apologized for the truncated schedule. However, as we've explained, situations have changed and the Councilors have other matters to attend to offworld."

"You've shrunken the negations by five hours," Lanchenzoor said. She'd also been chafing at the hurried pace of the talks. "If can't imagine five hours will really make a critical difference."

More than you can possibly know, Leia wanted to say.

"If this is some kind of negotiating tactic to get more concessions," said Dright, "I can almost respect it. But I don't like being lied to either."

Fey'lya cleared his throat and said, "Talk like this will only delay us further. It serves no purpose."

Malor'dacan and Lanchenzoor glanced at Go'thal. The Prex had accommodated the schedule change without complaint, and even now he seemed hesitant to force a confrontation about it.

"Councilor Fey'lya is quite right," interjected Im'nel. "Now, if we can just calm down and stick to the new schedule, I believe we can-"

Go'thal's comlink buzzed rudely in his pocket. The ZeHebthra fished it out and, without bothering to excuse himself from the table, turned it on. "This is the Prex speaking. Report."

Leia couldn't hear what was being said, but the Prex's long face drooped and the black-and-white striped fur on his head starting bristling in a way she'd only ever seen Fey'lya's do.

Go'thal spun his head to Lanchenzoor and said, "Raise the estate's shields! Now!"

The old woman gaped. "What are you talking-"

"Do it!" Go'thal snapped. As Lanchenzoor got out her own comlink, the Prex rose to his full height and turned angry eyes on the Republic delegates. "You fools! You should have warned us! Now we're all *dead!*"

"Please, explain what's going on," said Leia, tough she already as much as knew.

"The *Imperials* have entered the system," Lanchenzoor used the word like a curse as she put her comlink in her pocket. "Two star destroyers and an interdicator."

Dright shot to his feet. "You knew it was coming, didn't you? *Didn't you?*"

"There's no time for this," Winter said, so loud and firm it took everyone save Leia by surprise. "We have to get out of this tower and get to our ships."

"They have an interdicator." Dright flailed a hand skyward. "Where can we run?"

"We only have to hold out and be ready," Winter insisted. "Help is on the way."

The CSA officials didn't look assured; Leia didn't feel it either. Before she could fumble out something, the entire tower started shaking. Her chest clenched and for a second she thought they'd already been hit; then she saw the motion in the sky above.

Everyone ran for the window. They should have all been running the opposite direction, cramming into the lift and riding it down to safer ground, but they couldn't tear their eyes away. Even Leia, in all the adventures and derry-doing of her lifelong fight against the Empire, had never watched with her own eyes as a mile-long Imperial star destroyer, still trailing flame from atmospheric entry, tore apart the clouds and fell over the landscape like the fist of an angry god.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

EMANCIPATOR

When the division of the New Republic Third Fleet stationed at Quermia jumped to hyperspace, all crew were put on yellow alert but received no information as to where they were headed or when they were expected to arrive. It was possibly the worst situation a crew could be put in, but to actually announce they were riding to the Etti system would be to admit that they were, in effect, invading the Corporate Sector Authority's sovereign space, even though they were not, as yet, certain they'd even be fighting anyone because there was no way to be sure Makati was inbound toward Etti IV. So, as often happened, all the crewmen and soldiers in the battle group were stuck with *need to know*.

For Soontir Fel, it wasn't good enough. The suspicion he'd had since coming to Quermia had been mounting steadily, and he needed real answers. It was hard to ask sensitive but casual-seeming questions when everybody on the ship knew who you were. He tried for the first few hours of yellow alert anyway before surrendering to his own helplessness.

Then, finally, red alert came. Admiral Burke's own voice suddenly blared over every last speaker system in the battle group, saying, "All crews to battle stations. All fighters prep for combat. This is not a drill, repeat this is not a drill. Seven minutes to target, repeat seven minutes."

That set everyone scrambling. Fel had wandered restlessly toward the upper decks when he heard the call, and he got to the ready room later than everyone else. When he was throwing open the door to his locker and pulling out his

black flight suit, Avan and Janson were just sealing up theirs, Wedge and Hobbie were dashing out of the room, and he'd already seen Xarcce, Feylis, and Nrin running down the hall for the flight deck.

As he grabbed his helmet, Janson called, "See you in space," and then he and Avan were gone. Fel hurriedly jumped out of his boots and slid into his flight suit, then sat down again to put his boots back on.

Something glistened on the floor between his feet. He reached down and picked it up: a small metal data-card, lying right in front of his locker. He thought back a minute and might have remembered hearing the clatter of something falling when he'd pulled out his suit.

Devin Torr couldn't have left another present in his locker; Torr was elsewhere, apparently in the Corporate Sector, maybe involved with hunting Makati, there was no way to know. Maybe Torr still had a contact on this ship who'd relayed a message for him. It could have been Admiral Drayson himself. Or it could have fallen from someone else's locker.

A voice cracked over the headsets again, declaring that they'd revert to realspace in four minutes. Fel made a fist around the datacard, grabbed his helmet with his free hand, and ran for the hangar.

All the other Rogues were already in their cockpits, and he clambered up the ladder into his own. He dropped into his seat, buckled his crash webbing, threw on his helmet, and turned on his comm. "This is Rouge Eight, standing by."

As the others Rogues checked in and his cockpit roof lowered over him, he looked again at the datacard in his hand. He slid it into his forward console's small input port.

His heads-up display immediately lit up. The picture color was faded and the resolution low, but the contents were clear: Three stormtroopers with their helmets on, another with his off. And standing next to the bare-faced troopers was a woman with short-cropped dyed-brown hair, an expression that looked tired and dazed at once, and a pregnant swell at her stomach.

He recognized his wife instantly.

The two-dimensional video started to play, and the bare-faced trooper said, "Admiral, this is the Hand of Judgment reporting. As you can see, we have the package in good condition." He placed a hand on Syal's shoulder. Fel wanted to reach out and seize him by the throat. "We've lost our transit offworld. We're secure for now but request pickup as soon as possible. Coordinates are attached to this data package."

The video froze; the image of Syal surrounded by Imperial soldiers hung before him for a second; then the HUD cleared.

Fel immediately checked the datacard for an attachment. It was there: astrographical coordinates. He plugged the attachment into his ship's navigational computer. The result was Orron III, in the Corporate Sector.

Then Syal's brother said, "All Rouges, ready engines!"

Fel's hands ran over his control panel mechanically. As his thrust engines roared to life he clutched his joystick like he'd clutched the sticks of a dozen other snubfighters.

The flight deck shuddered slightly as they reverted to realspace. Fel saw stars through the mouth of the hangar, and a squadron of A-wings were first out the gate.

Then Wedge called, "Our turn, Rogues! All ships away!"

Fel did as he was told. His fighter jumped ahead, the eight and last in a straight and perfect line. They dove out of the hangar and into space. A blue and green planet lay far ahead; closer to them lay an *Imperial*-class star destroyer and a Sienar interdicator cruiser.

"Groups of two," Wedge called. "S-foils in attack position!"

TIE fighters were starting to spill out of the star destroyer but they were minutes away. Fel checked his scanners: they were barely inside the interdicator's gravity well.

Then he checked his nav computer to see which planet lay ahead. The answer came up immediately: Etti IV. The Corporate Sector, where Princess Leia and Borsk Fey'lya were supposed to be meeting secretly with CSA officials. But the secret had come out, just like he'd been afraid of.

It was only when he checked for IDs on the enemy ships that he understood. The destroyer was *Tenacious* and the interdicator was *Constrainer*, but his computer also pointed

out another *Imperial*-class warship far ahead, halfway sunken into Etti IV's atmosphere and invisible to his naked eye. It was *Steadfast*, flagship of Grand Admiral Makati.

Then he understood. He understood and he wanted to scream. He knew what Torr's mission had been: to lure Admiral Makati into a trap at Etti IV, where his three warships were pinned down by a much larger force.

He switched his comlink to Wedge's personal channel and barked, "Commander! Are the Councilors down on that planet?"

"Afraid so, Eight. The drag ship pulled us out too far from Etti IV. We need to punch through."

Fel swore and pounded his console so hard it hurt his fist. Urgently, Wedge said, "Eight, what is it? Eight, respond?"

"They were bait!" he snapped. "The Councilors, they were set up! They were pawns and so were we! All to catch Makati!"

"Listen, Eight, you're not making sense—"

The first wave of TIEs was approaching fast. Targets lit up on Fel's HUD and he didn't know why he should bother. He'd believed, truly believed the Republic was different, but now it was Brentaal all over again: good people used as bait, good soldiers used as pawns, all to be thrown away for somebody else's elaborate schemes. And somewhere else his wife was in danger and he couldn't help her. He felt like he'd come full circle.

But that wasn't true. His wife was close by, and this time he could save her.

Soontir Fel cut acceleration and closed his S-foils, then spun his nose toward the edge of the artificial gravity well and gunned his engines, leaving everything else behind.

"Eight just ran!" Nrin reported.

"Dammit!" Wedge snapped. He looked at his scanner and saw the green marker for Fel's ship jetting away in the opposite direction as the first wave of TIE fighters rushed to meet them.

There was no time to do anything but fight. He switched to torpedoes, got a fast lock on an approaching TIE interceptor, and fired. As the missile jumped ahead he pulled into a tight

turn, dodging sprays of green laser blasts. Avan popped off his own torp and stayed right on his wing through the tricky maneuver, while two TIEs burst into flames behind them.

Wedge found Fel on his scanner and jumped in pursuit. He called, "Two, fall back to Three's wing. Stay with Xarcce. I'm going after Fel."

Avan clicked a wordless affirmative and his fighter peeled off. Wedge switched his comm back to a private link with Rouge Eight and said, "Soontir, this is desertion! Explain yourself!"

"I know where Syal is!"

Wedge couldn't believe it. A squad of A-wings raced past him toward the fight and he kept running after Fel. "Rouge Eight, explain! *Now!*"

"I just found a message, a data chip in my locker. It's Syal! She's on Orron III and she's been captured!"

"*What?*"

"I *know* it's her! I'm sending it to you, right now!"

Wedge's console lit up, showing he'd received a data package. "Fel, I don't have time for this! There's a fight back there--"

"It's a set up! They used the councilors as bait for Makati!"

"What? How do you know that?"

"There's no time to explain! I'm not being someone's pawn again, not like that!"

Wedge swore and looked at his scanner. Fel was less than a minute from the edge of the artificial gravity well and he'd undoubtedly jump the second he was clear.

"That data package has the coordinates! Come with me, Wedge! We have to save her!"

"How do you--"

"It's *her*! I know my wife, damn it!"

"How do you know it's not a trap? Where did you even get this message?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going for her, Wedge. And if it's a trap, then only you can help me."

Wedge swore and pounded his console. The battle was lighting up back there; his pilots were fighting for their lives.

"Wedge, I *need* you." Fel's voice cracked as he pleaded. "Your *sister* needs you. We have to go, now!"

Wedge was catching up to his brother-in-law. The green reticules of his heads-up-display rested on four flares of Fel's engines.

"Soontir, this is desertion."

"I know."

"They'll never let you fly for them again."

"I don't want to. I want my *wife*."

"Dammit, I should shoot you down!"

Fel gave no reply. Wedge rested his thumb on the trigger and watched, watched, watched Fel's engines until they gave one last burst. Then he vanished into hyperspace, leaving dead space ahead.

Wedge floated in nothing. The battle raged behind him but he didn't turn around. He keyed up Fel's transmission and put it on his HUD.

He watched. He listened to the short message read off by the stormtrooper without a helmet but he only looked at the tired, sad pregnant woman held captive by four Imperial soldiers. Without Fel to tell him he'd have never known that was his sister, and he felt ashamed.

For Fel to have gotten it in the first place it had to have been a trap, but that didn't change anything. Fel was leaping into it, and Syal was already caught.

He plugged the attached coordinates into his nav computer. All it would take was the pull of a lever to turn his back on the cause he'd fought for his entire life. Then he'd be a deserter too, just like Fel.

He knew it, and in the same instant knew he could never live with himself if he deserted his family.

His hand shook and he switched his comm to the Rogues' group channel. He wasn't sure if his signal would carry this far, but he said, "Attention Rouge Squadron... This is Wedge Antilles. Hobbie Klivian is now Rouge Leader. Repeat, Hobbie's in charge. I have to go... And I'm sorry... I'm sorry."

Words caught in his throat. He heard a voice try and speak to him but it was too marred by static to make sense of.

Wedge turned off his comlink and closed his S-foils. His hand found the lever and pulled. The infinity of hyperspace swept him away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CORUSCANT

As he clambered up the old ladder to the docking hooks from which his TIE fighter hung, Tycho Celchu couldn't help but feel a little ashamed of leaving Marya and Shome behind. They were on the flight deck beneath, looking down at him with weary and affectionate smiles, like they were an old couple watching their grandson go out into the world. When he was gone, they'd have this oversized safehouse all to themselves. It seemed a sad fate, but the alternative, that they'd fall prey to Isard's hunters just like all the other NRI agents in Imperial City, was even worse.

Tycho forced himself to turn his attention away from them and clambered up into his TIE fighter. He dropped himself inside and buckled his crash webbing but refrained from putting the uncomfortable, airtight helmet on for as long as possible while he ran his preflight checks. As the craft's repulsors warmed up, he pulled a single data-key out of the front pocket of his flight suit, looked it over as though it were a treasured talisman, then put it away once more.

As Marya and Shome had predicted, it had taken time for them to process all of the data Tycho had recored during his flights over Coruscant. Most it had, in fact, been related to the defenses Isard had put up around Imperial City since taking over, and while that was a great prize for Cracken, Ackbar, and the others planning the inevitable taking of the Core, it wasn't the main reason Tycho had come.

Thankfully, that information had come through too. According to the isotopic tracker Tycho's sensors had picked

up, someone had left the safehouse where Syal Antilles had been held and, after some wandering and detours, eventually determined that the being carrying that tracker had boarded a transport on a landing pad rented out by Saarís Transit Limited.

Shome, a surprisingly good slicer for an old guy, was able to access the internal systems for that landing complex and, subsequently, the corporate records of Saarís Transit, which appeared to regularly run large commercial flights up the Hydian Way, though its route had been greatly truncated by the ongoing war.

Shome had also pulled out copies of the passenger repositories that all registered commercial transport companies were required by ISB to keep. For once, Tycho was almost thankful for Isard's iron-handed security measures. Shome had placed a copy of all that information, along with all the airborne scans of Coruscant's defenses, and loaded them onto Tycho's data-key to carry back to *Home One*. At the same time, he and Marya would make more copies of the information and start distributing it to other NRI operatives scattered on other parts of the planet. One way or another, it was all sure to get back to Cracken and Ackbar.

Tycho should have felt accomplished as he stuck on his helmet and sealed its breathing tubes to the respiratory apparatus on his suit. Instead he felt claustrophobic, edgy, and not yet convinced that all his trouble had been worth it. That information on Saarís Transit was several weeks old, and in that time Syal could have gone to Bakura for all anyone knew. Still, it was a start. It was all he'd really expected to find. He hoped it would help Wedge somehow.

Tycho fired up his twin ion engines and checked his comm line. He patched a link down to the flight deck and said, "Shome? Marya? Anyone there?"

"We hear you, Tycho," the old woman replied. "Loud and clear."

"How's my ride out of here looking?"

"We just got a ping from the freighter. They've entered orbit over Imperial City and are ready to pick you up."

It was the best news he'd heard in weeks. "Tell them I'm on my way. And tell them I'm looking forward to getting out of here, no offense."

"None taken." Marya's laugh was soft, easy. "And I'm sure they know."

"We're going to release the docking clamps now," Shome interjected. "Are you ready, Tycho?"

"As I'll ever be. Thanks for the help, both of you. You have no idea how much this means."

"Releasing clamps now," Shome said.

Tycho kicked his repulsorlifts on, so his TIE dipped only slightly as the metal braces around his twin solar pylons retracted. As his TIE hovered in the middle of the hangar he craned forward and looked down through his octagonal viewport. Shome and Marya must have retreated from the hangar bay, and he felt some vague regret that he didn't get one last look at them.

"Take care of yourselves, both of you," he said into his comm.

"Take care of yourself, young man," Shome said.

"Have a safe flight home," Marya added. She really did sound like a grandmother.

Dragging it out any longer would leave his contact dangling in orbit over a hostile world, so he kicked in his ion engines and began the long climb out of this hidden factory base. The tangled industrial tunnel once again reminded him of the Second Death Star, and when he finally emerged into Coruscant's skies he found it was night in the Works. He pointed himself skyward and kicked away from the ugly mechanized landscape toward stars that gradually became visible as the planet's endless light sunk further and further away.

As the clouds peeled he checked his long-range scanners. He spotted the signature of the same freighter that had dropped him here several days ago and plotted a course. An Imperial system patrol ship was in low orbit, and he gave it a safe but casual berth. That route brought him a little closer to a few civilian ships, including a lumbering Gozanti passenger liner, a boxy Damorian cargo hauler, and a disc-shaped Corellian freighter, but none of them altered their

course for the lone TIE fighter. If Tycho had been a loyal Imperial pilot he'd have felt offended by their flagrant lack of fear; as it was, it filled him with a swelling sense of relief. Once he got aboard that freighter they'd have a clear shot to Brentaal, and from there they'd rendezvous with *Home One*, and this time *he'd* be the one waiting to surprise Winter in *her* cabin.

He squinted and tried to make out his ride up ahead. He thought he saw its hide glint in the reflected light of Coruscant's shine, bright and winking against smaller fainter stars.

He reached for his comm link and turned it on. Before he spoke he glanced at his scanner one more time, just to verify the ship he'd laid eyes on was the one he wanted to call. As he looked he saw that Corellian freighter coming up on his aft; it seemed to have altered its course to follow him.

He had just a second to be surprised. Then blue ion blasts shot out from the freighter and caught his ship. Lightning danced over his cockpit consoles. He pulled his hands away before the electric shock could hurt him but his entire ship whimpered and went dark. Suddenly he was floating helpless over Coruscant, that freighter impossibly far away. His life support systems were attached to his suit so he was still breathing air, but as he pounded and prodded the consoles it was clear that breathing was all he could do.

Desperate, Tycho looked ahead at the freighter's distant gleam. He stared at it, helpless and longing, until he saw its engine-glow turn in his direction. That lasted only a second before it winked into hyperspace, leaving him behind.

The Corellian ship had to be coming up behind him now. No, it wasn't Corellian, he knew that. It had to have been Imperials at the helm. He swore, wondered if they'd got Shome and Marya too, then knew he couldn't do a thing about that. He grabbed the emergency self-destruct lever under his seat and pulled. Nothing happened. The ion cannon blast had fried even those systems. He was trapped and the Imps could come for him and take him down to Isard and make him betray everyone he knew and cared about and there was nothing he could do.

He didn't even have a blaster to turn on himself.

But there was one thing he could do. He could open the TIE's cockpit manually and cast himself out into the vacuum. He could pull off his helmet and die a horrible death in open space.

The only alternative was capture. He unbuckled his crash webbing, stood up over his chair, and wrestled with the two manual release levers overhead. He wrenched one open and heard the pop of decompression as his cockpit's limited air rushed out into space. The other release lever was harder; he grabbed it with both hands and braced his feet against the side of his cockpit until he finally had enough force to pull it all the way and pop his cockpit fully open.

He shoved his head out. Stars spun overhead; stars, and the gleaming jewel of Coruscant. Somehow it had never looked so beautiful.

Then he saw another man in another vac suit less than twenty meters away, tethered to an open airlock on that Corellian freighter's port side. He had a blaster rifle gripped in both hands.

Tycho reached for his helmet and fumbled to release it. He was too late. A brilliant shot of blue flashed across the vacuum and caught him in the chest. The blast knocked him back inside the TIE's cockpit. His hands fell away and his body went numb. As everything went dark he saw stars spinning, spinning, spinning through the porthole overhead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ETTI IV

In the space beyond Etti IV, the star destroyer *Tenacious* was being squeezed between the broadsides of the Mon Cal cruisers *Mon Remora* and *Mon Maria*, while at the same time the interdicator cruiser *Constrainer* was barely holding back attacks from *Mon Delindo* as it began its creeping retreat toward the planet. Admiral Burke had just ordered *Emancipator* to enter the fray and finish the drag ship off for good.

All in all, it should have been an encouraging scene, but it felt like they were losing. Somehow, Grand Admiral Makati had anticipated their coming and sent *Constrainer* and *Tenacious* to pull them out of hyperspace before they reached Etti IV's orbit, while at the same time dropping his own *Steadfast* directly into the planet's atmosphere over the estate where Councilors Fey'lya and Organa were holding their secret meeting.

Combined with the fact that Admiral Drayson had heard nothing from Alpha Black for days, it all pointed to some massive intelligence failure for which he was in some way responsible. He, Burke, and Dey'rylan had gambled that they could outwit Isard and Makati. They'd lost, and now the whole Republic might pay the price.

And, just to make a terrible situation worse, he'd received a report shortly before leaving Quermia saying that the super star destroyer *Vengeance*, recovered by Isard after Inquisitor Jerec's death, had left the Bilbringi shipyards for an unknown destination. There was no way to know where it

was going, but the simple fact filled Drayson with a gnawing dread.

As he and Willham Burke stood on *Emancipator*'s bridge, watching the glow of *Constrainer*'s engines grow closer bit-by-bit, Drayson leaned close to the other admiral and asked, "Any word from your old friend?"

"Nothing yet." He couldn't hide his scowl.

"How long ago did you send the signal?"

"As soon as we left hyperspace."

Drayson generally wasn't the type to say 'I told you so,' and he certainly didn't feel like doing it now. Instead he said, "What about our advance fighter team? Are they through?"

"Swift and Surprise are almost at the planet," Burke said, naming the destroyer's two fast A-wing squadrons.

"What about the Rouges and Banthas?"

"The X-wings are staying with the assault shuttles. They'll catch up when they can. I'm hoping the A-wings can tear a good hole through Makati's fighter wing before we try an extraction. TIE's can't maneuver worth a damn in atmosphere, so we'll have an extra advantage."

Burke was a former snubfighter pilot, and he knew the capabilities of those little ships. "Do you really think they can extract the councilors without more cover?"

"No," Burke scowled. "But once we get close enough I'm taking *Emancipator* into the atmosphere to fight it out with Makati."

"Those Mon Cal ships are going to be stuck in space." It was probably why Makati had dropped *Steadfast* into the atmosphere in the first place. That and the fact that a mile-long Impstar literally falling on top of you would scare anything witless.

"The Mon Cals can fire down from orbit," said Burke. "It won't be exact, but they can still give us suppression fire."

Constrainer was still tantalizingly outside firing range, and Etti IV further away than that. Drayson said, "It comes down to how long the councilors can hold on the ground, doesn't it?"

Burke nodded grimly.

That, and how long they had before *Vengeance* arrived. Drayson knew it, Burke knew it, but neither of them dared

say it. Even admirals of the New Republic could believe in jinxes.

From the bridge of *Steadfast*, the rolling grassy hills and distant snow-capped mountains of Etti IV's southern continent stretched placidly outward in all directions. TIE fighters and A-wings weaved through the clouds, dueling with blasts of green and red lasers, but they seemed like tiny flitgnats against the landscape and the massive star destroyer that hung immovable directly above Riga Lanchenzoor's estate.

Makati was disappointed but unsurprised to find that Lanchenzoor had installed a military-grade energy shield that, when activated, effectively protected her complex from *Steadfast*'s dorsal turbolaser cannons. Thankfully, he had other resources at his disposal. While the TIEs kept the A-wings occupied, *Steadfast* launched a trio of heavy drop ships from its main landing bay. They didn't have far to fall; the drop ships diverged as soon as they left *Steadfast* and within three standard minutes each had landed at an equidistant target zone outside the shield umbrella.

From there, each drop ship began unloading its supply of AT-AT and AT-ST walkers, and for good measure, scout-mounted speeder bikes. Each of the three landing parties formed a separate phalanx and began advancing on the estate complex. Their ground-level attack would slip beneath the shield umbrella, and Makati knew the heavy assault vehicles would make short work of the automated anti-personnel turrets that had risen from the ground to defend Lanchenzoor and the rebel leaders.

Makati was confident enough of taking the estate; the hard part would be escaping with the rebel prisoners. On *Steadfast*'s bridge, he watched the battle outside Etti IV's orbit play out on the tactical holo. After they'd effectively dragged the enemy fleet out of hyperspace a safe distance from Etti IV, *Constrainer* and *Tenacious* has found themselves outnumbered and overwhelmed by Rebel ships desperate to get past them to the planet. Grant had ordered both his ships to begin a gradual fall-back toward Etti IV, since the enemy would be moving in that direction anyway,

but he hadn't anticipated the ferocity of the Rebel attack. Their captive star destroyer was closing in on battered *Constrainer* and would soon destroy it. *Tenacious* was attempting to fall back to the planet but was being trapped by a pair of Mon Cal cruisers. And Grand Admiral Grant had still not arrived.

Mouth dry, Makati asked, "How much longer until *Accuser* can start firing on *Constrainer*?"

It took Captain Vivant a moment to reply, maybe because he's forgotten the original name of the destroyer the Rebels had stolen. "They'll be within firing range in three minutes."

Not enough time. Makati examined the holo again. At their current distance from the planet, a mini-jump through hyperspace would be dangerous for the Rebels. Whether that interdicator kept its gravwells up or not, the enemy could only safely approach Etti IV at sublight speeds.

"Tell *Constrainer* to lower her gravity wells and fall back from the battle zone," Makati ordered. There was no point in wasting that ship and its crew.

The tactical crew didn't hesitate to relay that order. As the communications officer called up *Constrainer*'s bridge, Makati added, "Lieutenant, tell the crew 'Well done.'"

The officer relayed the news, but Makati turned his attention back to the holo. While he wanted that ship and its crew to flee safely, a part of him also knew that the longer the Rebels were delayed fighting away from Etti IV, the longer he would have to retrieve the enemy leaders below. Nonetheless, he breathed a sigh of relief as *Constrainer* started to run, and the enemy did not pursue.

"Admiral, the Mon Cals are falling back from *Tenacious*," Vivant pointed out.

Makati nodded as he watched it on the holo. The captured *Accuser*, all three Mon Cal cruisers, and all the Rebel support ships were all vectoring straight for Etti IV.

"They'll be on us now, sir," Vivant breathed. "What are your orders?"

"For us, Captain? We hold, right where we are. Continue the bombardment of Lanchenzoor's shields; we just might get lucky and break through. As for *Tenacious*..." He

considered, then said, "Tell *Tenacious* to come to Etti IV. Have Captain Morvinian join us in our current location."

"You mean an atmospheric insertion? Sir, with the damage *Tenacious* has taken, the air pressure might create problems with hull integrity."

"Then make sure Morvinian runs proper checks. But tell him to join us in the atmosphere if he can. He'll stand a better chance of making it through this fight if he puts as much distance between himself and those Mon Cals as he can."

"Understood, sir."

As Vivant turned to relay the order, Makati looked once more at the placid cloudscape hovering over Etti IV's fields. He hadn't wanted to tell the captain that he thought they might need *Tenacious* to stay alive. The Rebels would surely bring their captured destroyer into the atmosphere as well, and it could very well prove an even match with *Steadfast*. Their larger fighter wings from the cruisers in orbit might well prove enough to tip the scales in their favor, and he needed *Tenacious* to tip them back in the Empire's direction for as long as the battered destroyer could hold out. He didn't relish the thought of sacrificing Captain Morvinian's ship, but for the success of this mission, it just might be necessary.

He watched on the holo as all the ships in orbit, friends and enemies alike, started plunging toward one point on Etti IV's surface. The only things left to do now was wait for Grant to come and write the end of this fight.

As she peered through the macrobinoculars, Leia Organa felt a chill run down her spine. The star destroyer overhead had cast the entire Lanchenzoor estate in shadow, but the fields beyond were aglow with afternoon sunlight that slanted in the faces of two giant AT-AT walkers slipping beneath the rim of the shield umbrella and marching inexorable toward her position. The automated defensive cannons built into the estate grounds had never been designed to take on such mighty enemies, and they wouldn't last long once they came within reach of the AT-AT's laser cannons. And with the defensive towers gone, those trapped on the ground would be slaughtered.

It was like Hoth all over again.

“Princess!” a voice called behind her. “Princess, over here!”

Leia dropped the macobinoculars and looked behind her. Mokka Falanthas was waving one hand, coaxing her toward the open door of the building behind them.

There was nothing she could do about the AT-ATs. Leia followed the Iktotchi diplomat and tried very, very hard not to look at the star destroyer’s hull that had replaced the sky above them. When she ducked inside the building she felt grateful to have something else over her head. From the outside it looked like a squat one-storey thing with small windows placed along the ceiling, and the inside looked like a half-empty storage room.

Viceprex Lanchenzoor, flanked by her twin bodyguards, was leading the rest of the delegation team to the opposite corner of the room. Once Leia was inside, Falanthas pulled the door shut and slammed down its heavy locking bars.

“Do you really think we can hide in here?” Leia asked as she jogged across the room. “Those walls aren’t bunker-thick.”

“They don’t have to be,” said Viceprex Malor’dacan as he stood at Lanchenzoor’s shoulder. The human woman finished plugging her code into the keypad on the wall, and a moment later a portion of the permacrete slid away to reveal a set of stairs riding downward into the dark.

“Can that get us off the estate grounds?” asked Viceprex Dright.

Lanchenzoor shook her head. “I have tunnels connecting major parts of the estate. There’s a security station at the center of the network where we can keep track of the Imperials’ advance.”

“Lovely, we can watch our imminent deaths,” Fey’lya said. “What *else*?”

“We can reach the hangar also. I have ships that are fast and armed and can get us out of here.”

“That doesn’t do us any good so long as the shield is in place,” Dright pointed out.

“That shield is the only thing keeping us from being vaporized,” Malor’dacan reminded him.

"I wouldn't be sure about that." Dright glanced at the rebel councilors.

Leia didn't need her weak Force abilities to know what he was thinking. "Makati might want us alive, but what he wants with us isn't going to be pretty. It won't be pretty for any of you either."

Dright reply was cut off by a shuddering explosion. Lanchenzoor said, "There goes the first tower. It won't be long now."

"Then I humbly suggest we all get down the stairs immediately," said Falanthas.

"Agreed," said Fey'lya as his fur stood on end. "Viceprex, please lead the way."

Lanchenzoor went down the narrow stairwell first, followed by Go'thal and Fey'lya. Falanthas, Im'nel, and Brei'lya followed, then Malor'dacan. Leia and Winter followed, while Dright and Lanchenzoor's two bodyguards brought up the rear along with Fey'lya's protocol unit. The shuffling droid was slowing them down and might need to be left behind; it made Leia glad she hadn't brought Threepio.

As they started hurrying through the dark tunnels, Leia had to grab hold of her long dress just to keep from tripping over its muddied white edges. When she spotted Winter doing the same, she laughed against herself.

"If only the Imps had let us change clothes first," he said.

"If only," Winter replied. She clearly didn't see the humor in the situation.

"I'm used to talking in fancy clothes and fighting in normal ones. I'm not used to mixing it up."

"Quite," said Winter, and Leia doubted she'd get anything else beyond a couple words and an angry frown.

The tunnel shook again, and the light flickered. For a second, they were all plunged in utter blackness; then light came back on again.

"What happened?" asked Brei'lya. "Have they breached the estate?"

"They just hit another cannon," said Lanchenzoor. "When they're all the way in, you'll know."

They barely made it ten more meters before the tunnel shook again, worse than before. The lights shuddered, then

went off entirely. Lanchenzoor called for her bodyguards to bring their lights. One slipped past Leia and Winter while the other stayed in the rear Dright.

"Now are we fully breached?" asked Bre'lya testily.

"We'll know once we get to the security center," the Viceprex replied. "It's only a few more—"

The tunnel shook and duracrete tore. Leia heard the rumbling behind her and threw herself forward, grabbing Winter around the waist and pulling both of them ahead as the tunnel started collapsing behind them. She heard the awful thunder of more duracrete cracking and felt chunks of dirt pound on her head and back. The light from the Espo behind her went out.

She and Winter stumbled to their feet once the shaking stop. The guard up front swung his light around. Leia and Winter cast long shadows on the rubble clogging the tunnel behind them. She saw the forearm of that protocol droid laying at her feet, battered and broken off from a body that had surely been crushed.

"What happened to Viceprex Dright?" asked Fey'lya.

"He's gone," Falanthas called back. "Him and the guard. They're just... *gone*."

Winter grasped her friend's arm and whispered, "Leia, can you..."

Leia shook her head, dumbfounded. She felt nothing in the Force behind her. She didn't know what that meant. Maybe she was just too panicked. She wasn't a Jedi like her brother; she barely understood her own power at all. All she knew was that she couldn't feel anyone alive in the debris.

Winter tugged her arm again, and she realized that everyone else was already moving forward. Leia hurried after them. As she sidled along Winter, she whispered, "Do you think we can trust them?"

"The Viceprexes?" Winter whispered back, eyeing Malor'dacan's head-tails as they bobbed and swayed ahead of her.

"Makati must have found out we were here somehow."

Winter looked away. The only light in the tunnel was at the head of the column and it was impossible to read her expression.

"I just don't know who we can trust," Leia whispered.

"Trust doesn't matter," said Winter. "Right now, we have to take what we can get."

She was right, as usual. The tunnel shook again but didn't break. They hurried on through the dark.

As six X-wing fighters dove through the wispy white clouds, Hobbie Klivian tried very, very hard to keep his mind off the two men they'd left behind. He couldn't help thinking of it that way, even though by all logic it was Wedge and Fel who's left *them* behind, for a reason none of them knew but could all guess at

"Hey Hobbie, see that?" called Janson. There didn't seem a point in sticking to callsigns anymore.

"See what?" Hobbie glanced at his scanners. At the moment, all he could see with his eyes were clouds whipping past his cockpit.

"Dozen squints, about five clicks ahead."

"I was kind of hoping Swift and Surprise Squads would've cleared them out," muttered Feylis.

"Let them come," said Xarce. "I am in a fighting mood."

She sounded more resolved than confused. Hobbie tried to follow her lead, even though still really wished Wedge were here, not to mention Fel and Tycho, or Plourr, or Luke Skywalker. And, while he was at it, Ibtisam and Dllr and Herian and Elscol and all the rest.

But enough. The clouds cleared away and a blue-white sky filled his vision. Far in the distance, the dark daggers of twelve TIE Interceptors were turning to meet them. Far beyond that was a sight that made Hobbie suck in anxious breath: one *Imperial*-class star destroyer, almost as pale as the sky, casting a wedge-shaped shadow over what looked like a small village as it raining green turbolaser blasts on the shield dome below.

Somehow, those things never looked so *big* in space.

"Squints are coming to engage," warned Nrin. "It'll be two-to-one."

"Odds sound good to me," Janson said, "Unless they're wearing red stripes."

"We'll find out soon enough," said Hobbie. "Arm your torps, people. Lock targets and get ready to launch."

The TIEs were wheeling around to come at their flanks, but Hobbie was about to lock onto one of them. His targeting lock held firm even as the fighter came around at an angle. He called, "All ships, on my mark, then break. One. Two. Three. Mark!"

The six X-wings launched their torps and scattered. Tangled thrust-trails weaved through the atmosphere toward their targets. TIE Interceptors were much more agile in atmosphere than standard Imperial fighters but they still couldn't outmaneuver a set of torpedoes. As he spun around toward the nearest TIE, Hobbie spotted firebursts in the corner of his vision and saw broken bodies of TIE fighters trailing black smoke as they fell toward the fields below.

He set his laser to quad-linked shots and sent repeated volleys of red laser blasts at the nearest TIE. He managed to clip it and send it spiraling, but any celebration was cut off by the battered his shields were taking as another TIE tore down on him.

"On it, Lead," called Nrin. "Pull up!"

Hobbie did what he was told, just in time to see Nrin's X-wing barreling nose-first toward his. He swerved up just in time for Nrin's fighter to give his pursuer a face-full of laser-blasts. As Nrin's X-wing tore through the explosion and tumbling shrapnel, Hobbie leveled out his X-wing. It had been a while since he'd flown in atmosphere and he'd forgotten what strong gravity did to your body when making those kinds of maneuvers.

"Lead, Nrin, two from above!" called Janson.

Hobbie swore and looked at the cloud-streaked sky above his cockpit. He couldn't see anything but apparently Nrin could; the Quarren called, "Break right, Lead!" and once more Hobbie did as he was told.

A torrent of green plasma plunged through the space where he'd just been. The TIEs that fired it plunged through a second after. As Hobbie and Nrin formed up on each other's wings, Janson and Feylis took to pursuit. The latter popped off a torpedo that caught one squint in a fireball; the other veered away sharply.

"That one's mine," Hobbie called, and dove right after it. He knew he should be saving his torpedoes but he didn't want to mess with lasers right now. He got his lock and fired his warhead. The TIE tried to spin and evade, and in space it was exactly the kind of maneuver that might have foiled a torpedo lock, but they were in atmosphere, with gravity tugging them down. The explosion sent it tumbling through a low layer of clouds and into the ground below.

"Are we clear?" Hobbie called as his scanners showed empty of hostiles.

"We're clear, Hobbie," Janson said.

"Anyone spot red stripes?" asked Avan.

"They were not flying good enough for that," Xarccc commented.

"Agreed. Those squints were naked, boss," said Feylis.

"Naked Imps. Just the way I like 'em," said Janson. "Okay, Hobbie, what now?"

Hobbie swung his nose around to the distant intimidating bulk of *Steadfast*. Despite the shadow it cast, he could make out the AT-ATs approaching the estate with his naked eye. "What do you think? Let's crack open some walkers."

"Lead, we've got company!" warned Nrin.

Hobbie scanned the skies for darting dark TIE fighters, and it took him an extra second to see the obvious. A second pale star destroyer was breaking through the scattered clouds on the opposite side of *Steadfast*.

The sight made Hobbie's gut fall into his chest. "Oh," he said, "Oh *nuts*."

"Hold on, boss, check your scanners," Feylis said. "That's *Emancipator*!"

"Looks like she's launching more fighters," added Avan.

"Well I take back my pessimism," Hobbie said. "All Rouges, full ahead for *Emancipator*. Let's rescue our people."

All things considered, the auxiliary communications relay in the aft section of J-deck on the star destroyer *Steadfast* was a pretty good spot to keep track of the Battle of Etti IV. The comm node also allowed Reyan Dey'rylan to slice into the flagship's exterior sensor network as well as its internal

holo-cam system. Best of all, there was nobody to bother him. The comm relay was little more than a dark closet tucked away at the confluence of two maintenance shafts, and with the fight *Steadfast* was in the middle of, nobody was bothering to run any maintenance checks.

It was, therefore, the perfect place for a couple of Bothan spies to squeeze together in the dark, faces lit up only by the light of the room's three viewscreens. Dey'rylan had one feed plugged into each screen, and he couldn't keep himself from patching into the security system to scan for Grand Admiral Makati. After checking his personal quarters and finding only that old protocol droid standing unassuming in a corner, he checked the bridge and found the man in his white uniform, pacing the deck, gesturing and giving sound-less orders. It was strangely captivating to watch.

"You ever wonder if this is what it was like for Sheer?" Kasck asked in a low whisper.

Dey'rylan tore his attention from Makati and glanced at the other Bothan. He didn't have a good answer. He'd been trying very hard not to think about Sheer Valeen, or Koth Melan, or any of the other people he'd known who'd already given their lives to kill the Empire.

In the end, all he managed in reply was a grunt.

"Maybe, maybe not," Kasck continued, "But I kind of hope it was. For her sake. She'd have gotten a nice view of everything outside *Aggressor*. She'd have known how it was going to end, when the time came."

If the end was going to come for them, they'd know it, though Dey'rylan didn't expect them to be blown out of the sky any time soon. In placing himself exactly above the Lanchenzoor estate, Makati had accomplished a lot of things at once. He'd laid seige over the place in the most intimidating way possible, he'd distanced himself from the Mon Cal cruisers in orbit, and, perhaps most importantly, he'd made it pretty much impossible to destroy his ship without destroying the estate below and the thousands of innocent beings trapped there, including Fey'lya and Organa.

Now that *Emancipator* and *Tenacious* had both joined *Steadfast* in Etti IV's atmosphere, things were getting a little tight. The ships were launching fighters at one another but

seemed loathe to exchange actual broadsides. Dey'rylan didn't know what kind of danger it posed to light up a planet's atmosphere with excessive volumes of plasma, but all three massive ships seemed acutely aware that the most valuable prize in this whole fight lay on the vulnerable ground beneath them. Even the Mon Cal cruisers seemed to have mostly restricted themselves to launching fighter support rather than risk firing down at the planet's surface.

Makati had found a good defensive strategy, but if he tried to run in any direction he was stuck. The grand admiral wasn't stupid enough to box himself in like this with no hope of escape, and it made Dey'rylan nervous. There was something they were all missing.

His comlink buzzed and he eagerly plucked it from his pocket. "Dey'rylan here."

"You're still alive, good," said Jekk Karr.

"Likewise. We've found a good place with lots of camera feeds to hole up in. Where are you guys?"

"Deck BK aft, section 102. You see us?"

"Give me a sec." Dey'rylan shut off the security cam feed from the bridge and, with some effort, found the one Karr had mentioned. It looked like some long, narrow maintenance hallway, abandoned except for two guys in stormtroopers armor who were making un-stormtrooper-like gestures at the camera.

"You guys are professionals," Kasck smirked. "Did you run into any trouble?"

"Nope," said Ekrhine. "With the battle on everybody's going where they're supposed to go and assuming everybody else is to. So no security checks."

"What are you doing down there?" asked Dey'rylan.

"Check your schematics, Boss," said Karr. "We're right by the main targeting sensor node for the entire dorsal section of the ship."

"You're trying to knock out the bottom guns?" asked Kasck.

"Right on. We've got charges and everything, but we can't get through the door up ahead. We figure you might help."

"Give me a few minutes," Dey'rylan said, and started pulling up ship schematics on the other screen. It wouldn't

be hard for him to remotely disable the alarms on the door, assuming he could find the one they were looking at.

As he worked, Kasck said, "If you're just knocking out the targeting computer they'll still be able to aim those guns manually."

"Sure," said Karr, "But it'll be a lot harder for them to hit our snubfighters and a lot easier for our evac shuttles to move in."

"Fair enough. Plan to hit anything else after this?"

"I don't know. When are you guys going after Makati?"

"I don't know. We're all a long way from the bridge and the whole command tower is really fortified. Plus he's got that crazy gunslinger droid we saw at—"

"I think I've got it," Dey'rylan said. "Guys, check the serial number on your door panel. Read it to me."

The two faux-stormtroopers disappeared from the camera's view, but a moment later Ekrhine read, "EK-768-995. Got it?"

"I've got it. I'm disabling the door now." They let him work in silence, and it took him less than a minute to kill all security protocols for the door.

"Great work, boss," said Karr. "Leave the rest to us."

"Can't wait for the boom," Dey'rylan said and flicked off his comlink. He looked at Kasck and said, "Finally we're being useful."

"Finally," agreed the other Bothan. "I just hope Torr got off Bonadan safe."

"He knows what he's doing. Don't worry about him." Dey'rylan switched the feed from the security cameras back to *Steadfast's* bridge and tapped a claw on Makati's pale figure. "Now *that's* what we need to worry about."

"I guess we should start looking up the sneakiest way up there."

"I guess so too. Now if you'll give me a minute—"

Something on this third screen lit up. Dey'rylan glanced at the reports from the outside battle for the first time in minutes and couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Kasck sensed his surprise. "What is it? What happened? Is it *Emancipator*? Was she hit?"

"Oh, no," Dey'rylan said. "This is much worse."

According to the sensor reports, the three Imperial warships had just jumped into low orbit and begun to engage the Mon Cal cruisers: two *Imperial*-class star destroyers and one massive, nineteen-kilometer-long super star destroyer called *Vengeance*.

Grand Admiral Octavian Grant was proud to be considered an old-school tactician with an appreciation for precise and elegant use of individual units to achieve battlefield supremacy. Nonetheless, as he stood on *Vengeance*'s bridge, he had to admit there was something to be said for getting on a really big star destroyer and pulverizing your enemies with endless waves of emerald destruction.

Vehn Sysco seemed to be enjoying it as well, judging from the captain's gleeful expression as he watched *Vengeance*'s turbolaser batteries bombard the three Mon Cal cruisers and their support ships. The Rebels, to their credit, weren't stupid enough to try and fight an enemy with overwhelming firepower. They were trying to break formation and scatter, forcing *Vengeance* to chase one but not the others.

Still, they had been stuck deep in Etti IV's gravity well when Grant had arrived, and they had limited places to run as *Vengeance*'s black sword cut down at them. One Mon Cal ship managed to make a cleaner break than the others, and Grant assigned Captain Trigit to chase it down with *Implacable*. At the same time, he ordered *Oriflamme* to stay close, just in case he needed it.

Another Mon Cal ship and its two flanking assault frigates were attempting to sneak beneath *Vengeance*; Grant chose to ignore their threat for the moment and concentrate fire on the third and last heavy cruiser. The ship was closest to *Vengeance*'s stern and attempted to fire off several volleys of concussion missiles at its engine section. The week-long repairs at Bilbringi had been rushed at the end, but the techs had still done a fine job of bringing the ship back up to fighting shape, and *Vengeance* was able to absorb the impact from every last missile before unleashing wave after wave of turbolaser fire from its aft batteries. The Mon Cal ship withstood the fire few volleys, but then Captan Bremel moved *Oriflamme* to strike from above, acting at the hammer

that pounded the Rebel ship against *Vengeance's* anvil. It was crushed between the two and, after less than ten minutes of nonstop turbolaser fire, it lost all engine shields, suffered a reactor burst, and exploded so brilliantly the flashing light carved shadows on the faces of the bridge crew.

The cheers were respectably restrained, but Grant didn't have time to bask in them. The comm officer said he had an incoming transmission from Captain Bremel, and the grand admiral told him to sent it directly to his personal comlink.

"What is it, Captain?" asked Grant.

"Sir, we're holding a call on your private channel," Bremel said. "It's from the same private channel as before."

"Excellent. Tight-beam it over to *Vengeance*, executive priority."

"Very good, sir."

Grant turned off his comlink and walked over to Sysco. "Captain," he said, "I have to take a brief call in my cabin. You have the bridge."

"Yes, sir," Sysco said. He looked like he was enjoying this.

Grant hurried back to the spartan chamber he couldn't help but think of a Jerec's. He fired up the communications console, input his executive code, and brought up the holo-image of Leonia Tavira.

"Ah, Grand Admiral, it's good to see you," she said pleasantly. He was instantly suspicious.

"Where are you now?" he asked. "Have you found Starflare?"

"We're on our way."

"Tell me your location and I'll meet you." With *Vengeance* on the scene the battle was all but over. He could leave the fight to Makati, Sysco, and Trigit and still beat Tavira and Thrawn to Starflare; at least, it was worth a try.

Tavira tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Hmmm... And why would I do that?"

"Are you aboard that star destroyer you wanted?"

"I am. If you fulfill the rest of your bargain, I'll tell you where Starflare is."

Grant snorted. "The longer you draw this out the longer it will take me to get there. Assuming you even know where Starflare is."

"I do," the girl said defiantly. "Give me *Invidious* and I'll let you have her."

"No. Here's what we're going to do, girl. You tell me the location. I meet you there. Then I tell you how to take over *Invidious* because, together, we're going to have to fight off a grand admiral to get our prize."

She looked confused. "A grand admiral? Makati?"

"No, you trollop, Grand Admiral *Thrawn*. You've heard of him, haven't you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I've heard.... Rumors."

"They're not rumors. He may be an upstart alien but he hunted down and killed Grand Admiral Zaarin. Do you really think you can fight him off with one star destroyer on a skeleton crew of pirates and riffraff?"

She scowled. "How do I know you're not lying to me?"

He wasn't lying. He wasn't telling the truth either. For all he knew, *Thrawn* had claimed *Starflare* already, though he'd have gotten a call from *Isard* complaining about it by now.

The alien was out there somewhere, he was sure of that. With utter honesty, Grant said, "You cannot risk going against *Thrawn* by yourself. Don't be a fool."

For a moment she looked like the confused, torn teenager she was. Then she tilted her head back and attempted that *Isard* impression again. "I am currently en route to *Orron III*. I expect to meet you there *and* receive full control over *Invidious*."

"Excellent. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Grant turned off the link and the holo shut off. He stood in front of the console for a long moment, then called up *Steadfast*. Makati's image promptly filled the space where *Tavira's* had been.

"Grand Admiral Grant," Makati said, with a rare and relieved smile on his lips. "Thank you for your timely arrival."

"I assure you, it's my pleasure. We've already destroyed one of their *Mon Calamari* cruisers. Have you retrieved the Rebel leaders yet?"

"No, but my ground forces have infiltrated the estate. It's only a matter of time."

"What about the rebel star destroyer?"

“We have it boxed in, and without support from the cruisers in orbit it can’t threaten us.”

“Good. I’ll send fighters down from *Vengeance* to help your air support.”

“I’d very much appreciate that.”

There was no point in hesitating. Grant said, “Grand Admiral Makati, I’m afraid I must leave the rest of the battle in your hands. I’m taking *Oriflamme* on an urgent mission, but *Vengeance* will remain in orbit. I’ll tell Captain Sysco to defer to your commands.”

“I see.” Makati tilted his head quizzically. “Do you need assistance on this mission?”

“Not at all,” Grant said, then decided to reassure him. “I have to make rendezvous with a mutual friend of ours. Grand Admiral Thrawn.” It wasn’t exactly a lie.

Makati’s eyes lit up. “I see. Well, make haste then. And good luck.”

“Likewise.” Grant snapped a crisp salute. The other grand admiral returned it. Then Grant reached for the console and Makati’s image died.

Grant took a deep breath, then marched out of Jerec’s cabin for the last time. All in all, he knew he’d feel better being on his old ship. It was the closest thing he had to home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ORRON III

They were still an hour outbound from Orron III when Captain Niriz went to see the grand admiral in his personal quarters. Niriz was slightly surprised he hadn't emerged to oversee final preparations, and when he entered Thrawn's chambers he found the grand admiral seated as usual in his command chair, observing holo-projected images. This time he wasn't examining art objects or star maps. The holos that ran before him were publicity images of Wynssa Starflare. At first it struck Niriz as absurd to find the grand admiral examining them like some lovestruck fan. Then he noticed that so many of the holos featured Starflare together with her husband. Many of them looked like they'd been snapped by journalists or paparazi during screening events.

"She's much better at faking a smile than he is," Thrawn observed as he brought on holo up to fore: Starflare in a long sequined dress, holding the arm of Baron Fel in full formal uniform. They were posing for that one and smiling at the holo-photographer, but as Thrawn had said, hers looked more honest than his.

"A strange pairing, sir," Niriz admitted. "A holo-actress and a soldier."

"But both peerless in their respective fields, and both Corellians far from home. I imagine they found some complement in each other." Thrawn's chair pivoted away from the holo so he could look at Niriz. "But I'm sure you didn't come for this. What is it, Captain?"

"We're less than an hour out from Orron III."

"I know. Have the Noghri been moved to the staging area?"

"Yes, sir, and their shuttle has been readied. There was something else though."

"Go on."

"Sir, we just received a message packet from Grand Admiral Makati. He reports that the situation at Etti IV is well in hand and thanks us again for recovering *Vengeance*."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Sir, he also said that Grand Admiral Grant had taken his star destroyer, *Oriflamme*, and was coming to meet us." Thrawn's forehead creased in thought. Niriz added, "Sir, I wasn't aware we'd been cooperating with Grant in this."

Quietly, calmly, Thrawn said, "We weren't."

"Admiral, is this going to be a problem?"

Without answering, Thrawn shut off the holo and rose from his chair. He began walking for the exit and Niriz hurried after him.

"I believe we'll have to change our plans," Thrawn said as they turned into the hallway. "Captain, I'm going to request that you drop us out of hyperspace on the edge of the Orron system. Interpose us on the vector one would expect a ship outbound from Etti IV to arrive from and have *Corvus* bring up her gravity wells to full power.

Niriz didn't like the sound of that at all. "Sir, does this mean we're going to have to fight Grant?"

"What it means is that I suspect Director Isard of trying to renege on our agreement and take Starflare for herself. I made steps to ensure that Baron Fel is also coming to Orron III, but I'm afraid I didn't anticipate Grant's arrival."

It wouldn't be the first time they'd fought a grand admiral, but in chasing Zaarin they'd been chasing a renegade and a traitor, not an officer still aligned with Coruscant.

"Sir..." Niriz said cautiously, "Do really believe Fel is worth making an enemy of Grant and Isard for?"

Thrawn halted before they reached he reached the turbolift that led down from the command tower. He fixed his red eyes on Niriz and said, "My main priority is still what the Emperor tasked to me: securing the Unknown Regions from

Nuso Esva and his like. Isard and Grant can't help me with that. Fel will."

"If we do this, sir, I don't think we'd be welcome in Isard's Empire any longer."

"Does that worry you, Captain?"

Niriz was surprised to find it didn't, not really. He'd left his old life in the old Empire behind and his return to Imperial space had only solidified his allegiance to Thrawn above all others. It was like his old life had belonged to another man.

He wasn't worried about old loyalties. He was worried about the battle ahead. "A fight against Grant may be difficult, sir. That's my concern."

"As it should be, Captain, but I trust you to hold the line in my stead."

Niriz blinked. "*Me*, sir? Where will you be?"

"If Grant is after Fel and Starflare, I believe it's all the more imperative that I accompany the Noghri to Orron III myself."

"Sir, that's too—" he was about to say *dangerous*. "Sir, I just want to advise you to take as thorough precautions as you can."

"Do you doubt the Noghri, Captain?"

"No, sir, I—" Niriz noticed the tight curve at the sides of Thrawn's mouth, and realized the grand admiral was playing with him. Niriz shook his head and said, "Just be careful, sir. We can't afford to lose you."

"I could say the same." Thrawn walked over to the portal and summoned the turbolift. "Hold off Grant for as long as you can. When you get a signal from my shuttle saying we're leaving the planet, feel free to drop gravity wells and run. And if you think the situation had become too dangerous, if *Grey Wolf* or *Corvus* are in danger of being outright destroyed, you also have my permission to run."

"Sir, I won't abandon you on that planet."

"This ship is not to be thrown away, Captain. Neither are you."

Niriz's hands clenched at his side. He'd never had a compliment make him feel so awful. "Sir, I promise I will hold back Grant as long as possible."

"I don't doubt it." The lift doors spread open. Thrawn stepped into the tube, then turned to face Niriz. He gave the captain a tiny nod and said, "Fight well."

Niriz snapped a salute. The doors slid shut and took Thrawn away. Niriz listened until the whir of the moving turbolift had faded nothing. Then, slowly, he lowered his hands to his side, turned, and marched for the bridge.

Leonia Tavira had been more than half expecting a bluff. What she'd heard about the mysterious thirteenth grand admiral had mostly sounded like incredible rumor, and when Grant had told her that the alien commander was on his way to Orron III to pick up Wynssa Starflare, she'd suspected it was just a delaying tactic, an excuse to hold off giving her *Invidious* for as long as possible.

When the star destroyer was wrenched from hyperspace too soon, she knew Grant hadn't been lying and immediately wished he had.

"What is this?" squawked Captain Morux. "Why did we leave hyperspace so soon?"

"It's an interdiction field, sir," said the helmsman, who'd been glancing nervously over his shoulder at Rossk for the past hour.

"Put all shields up now," Tavira commanded.

"This is still my ship," Morux glared at her. "Belay that order. Sensors, what have we got?"

"I'm picking up two ships, hard to starboard, sir. Looks like an interdictor, *Immobilizer*-class, and... one *Imperial*-class star destroyer."

Morux paled. "Hail the star destroyer. Ask what they want. And... raise shields."

Tavira snorted amusement looked around the bridge. She'd taken advantage of the travel time to reroute her people throughout the ship, putting them at key locations as Grant had advised her, but she still had personnel on the bridge, including two Nikto, the four battered Clone Wars battle droids, Rossk, and Levran.

"Captain," said the comm lieutenant, "The star destroyer is already hailing us. They're warning us to back away from the system at once."

“Are they identifying themselves?”

“Not explicitly, sir. ID transponders read *Corvus* and *Grey Wolf*.”

Morux shook his head. “I’ve never heard of those ships. Ask them whose flag they fly under.

“Sir?”

“Isard, Teradoc, Zsinj, Kaine, *whoever*. Ask them.”

As the lieutenant made the call, Morux turned his glare back on Tavira. “What in the devil have you dragged us into?”

She put both hands on her hips. “You knew other people wanted our quarry. Are you going to fight for your prize or should I tell Treuton you turned your tail and ran at the first sign of trouble?”

“Have you heard anything else from your people?” he glowered.

She shook her head. “Not yet. Stall them, Captain. Buy as much time as you can but don’t engage them until we absolutely have to.”

“Captain,” called the comm lieutenant, “They identify themselves as flying for the Empire. That’s all.”

Morux kept his eyes on Tavira. “You know who they are, don’t you?”

“No, but I have an idea,” she said honestly. “The important thing is to hold.”

Morux gave another one of his deep-throated growls, turned, and stalked over to the tactical station. “Are shields up?”

“Yes, sir,” said a lieutenant. “Guns are warming too. Should we launch fighters?”

“How much time until they intercept?”

“Looks like... fifteen minutes to firing range.”

As Morux deliberated with himself, growling all the while, Tavira stepped to the back of the bridge. She brushed the side of her face and tapped on the comlink in her ear.

“Billibango,” she said, “Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Captain.”

“Are you still in position?”

“Yep. I’ve uploaded all the programs I could into *Invidious*’ computer core without triggering alarms. I can get

us control of the atmo systems, the gravity, the lights, a most of the door locks, and other auxiliary stuff. I can also shut down the sensor arrays and targeting computers if you want that."

If anything, they'd need those systems the most. "What about helm and weapons?"

"I can kill 'em but I can't control 'em. Sorry."

It was as she'd expected. Billibango was one of the best slicers in the Corporate Sector, and she'd set him on the job of hijacking as many of *Invidious*' computer systems as he could, but even the wily Xexto couldn't commandeer the ship on his own. They'd need Grant's help after all; Tavira just hoped he'd get here in time.

"What should I do now, Captain?" asked Billibango.

"Hold position and wait for my signal. Be ready to start bolting doors and cutting atmosphere in all compartments we don't have people in."

"Okay. You want to kill them or just knock them unconscious?"

Tavira considered for a moment, then said, "Just disable them. We can use prisoners to sell or barter."

She heard Morux walking toward her and tapped off the comlink. She spun on a heel and gave the flustered captain one of her girlish smiles. "Is everything under control?"

"That destroyer will be here in fifteen minutes," Morux said. "They still don't identify their loyalties. Who are they?"

Tavira tilted her head. "You can't even talk to the commanding officer?"

"Someone named Niriz. I never heard of him. But you know something, don't you? Tell me you know something."

His desperation was almost comical. She walked back onto the bridge, down the center aisle, and looked out the viewport. With her naked eyes she could just barely make out the gray wedge of the approaching star destroyer; she couldn't see the drag ship at all.

"Is *Corvus* holding position?" she asked.

Morux nodded.

"That means they're probably expecting someone else."

"And do you know who *that* is?"

"I think I might."

Morux sighed angrily. "And I don't suppose this someone else works for High Admiral Teradoc, does he?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then why shouldn't I just shot you as a traitor where you stand?" he put a hand on the butt of his holstered pistol.

He got his answer immediately; before the handful of guards he had on the bridge even noticed, the four Clone Wars battle droids whipped up their rifles and aimed at his back.

"That's one reason," Tavira smiled and tapped a finger playfully on his chest. "But since I'm generous I'll give you three. Second, if you kill me you lose my team, and without my team you'll never get to Starflare. Third, the man coming is our best chance against that star destroyer and he won't be pleased if it turns out you killed me."

The last part wasn't exactly true, but the captain didn't need to know that. Morux made another one of those growls before taking his hand off his pistol. The droids, slowly, lowered their guns.

"Tactical!" he called over his shoulder, still glaring at Tavira, "How long until they're in firing range?"

"Eight minutes, sir."

"Then launch a squadron of TIEs but tell them to hold at our bow. Do *not* engage unless they fire first."

"Yes, sir."

"A prudent measure," Tavira said. "I believe that we can--"

"Sir!" the lieutenant called again. "Another ship just dropped out of hyperspace!"

Morux spun away from Tavira and hurried over to the tactical station. The woman was right on his heels as he asked the lieutenant, "Can we identify it?"

"It looks like another star destroyer, sir. The transponder reads... *Oriflamme*."

Morux knew that ship, clearly. "Oh. Grand Admiral Grant."

"Excellent," Tavira clapped her hands together and said, "Communications! Get me a direct line with *Oriflamme*."

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Morux as she skipped over to the comm station.

"Captain, our help has arrived!" she said cheerily.

“Help? Grant works for Isard. And you-”

“Captain, listen carefully.” Still grinning, Tavira added steel to her voice. “If you want to survive the next hour, you should do exactly as I say.”

Grant was disappointed when they were wrenched out of lightspeed on the edge of the Orron system, but not surprised. There was only one major hyperspace route leading in and out of the system and it was just like Thrawn to use interdictors to cover his movements.

He took in the scene quickly: one drag ship and two star destroyers. He recognized both big ships immediately. Tavira had already mentioned *Invidious* as her soon-to-be personal destroyer, and *Grey Wolf* had led the hunt for Zaarin.

Grant took a deep breath. For years he’d longed for a chance to go head-to-head with the upstart alien admiral, but he’d never truly imagined a fight would happen, certainly not when the stakes were so high.

“Comm,” he said, “Hail *Grey Wolf*. Tell them I want to speak to their grand admiral.”

The lieutenant and his staff looked confused; Thrawn’s promotion was still little-known among Navy personnel. Before the lieutenant could make the call, he said, “Sir, we’re already getting a hail. It’s from the other star destroyer, *Invidious*.”

The sooner he gave her what she wanted, the more likely she’d be to leave him fighting Thrawn alone. Hoping to delay that a little, Grant walked over to the comm station and said, “All right, put her on.”

After a second, the holo-image of Leonia Tavira, still wearing her old Moff’s uniform jacket, appeared in front of him. Without prelude she said, “Grand Admiral, it’s time you fulfill your part of this bargain.”

“How do I know you won’t just take it and run?”

“I can’t run any more than you right now, Admiral. And I still want Starflare.”

“I’m sure you do. What makes you think you can get any closer to her than I can?”

“I still have my personal corvette, *Courtesan*. It’s a fast ship. I’ll send one of my lieutenants to the edge of the

gravity well. He'll micro-jump around the drag field and get to Orron III."

"And claim Starflare for himself?" Grant raised an eyebrow.

"My men are loyal, Admiral."

"Please," he scoffed. "I'm sure your, ah, *charms* are the only thing keeping your bunch of alien rabble from mutiny. Why can't you launch this corvette now?"

She lowered her voice and said, "Teradoc's people are holding her in the hangar and refusing to let her go. Give me control and we can change that."

Grant glanced at the tactical holo. *Grey Wolf* had been moving toward *Invidious*, but on *Oriflamme*'s arrival it had halted its approach and now sat midway between the two hostile destroyers. *Corvus* still sat far behind it, but from his position Grant could still attempt a charge that would force *Grey Wolf* to pull back and intercept him, leaving *Invidious* clear to launch that corvette.

After Tavira hijacked its systems, *Invidious* wouldn't be able to fight like a fully-manned ship, but a star destroyer was still a star destroyer, and Grant wanted as much firepower on his side before he engaged Thrawn. He still expected Tavira to try and run with Starflare once she had the prize, but he could send his own team to Orron III too.

"All right," he said finally, and withdrew a small key from his pocket. "This contains all the data needed to override the executive codes on that ship. You have to plug these sequences directly into the main computer cortex."

"I know. I have people who can do it."

"Are you standing by to receive the data?"

Tavira touched a hand to her cheek, briefly brushing back her hair. "I'm ready, Admiral."

"All right. Let's get this over with."

The codes came as Billibango had predicted they would, as a data packet attached to the transmission stream from *Oriflamme*. The Xexto slicer was already monitoring all comm signals coming in and out of the *Invidious*, and once Tavira sent him a warning, she had no doubt he'd take care of the rest.

For the first long seconds, nothing seemed to change on *Invidious*' bridge. Then there was a brief flickering of the lights; then Billibango's voice whispered in her ear, "We have the ship, Captain."

The lieutenant at the helm station was the first to frown and call up to Captain Morux, "Sir, my controls are no longer responding!"

"We're having problems too, sir," said a gunnery ensign.

"What do you mean?" Morux bent over the crew pit. "What kind of problems?"

"I'm getting a message saying I'm not authorized to access, sir."

"That's impossible. Use my override code. Alpha-sigma-nineteen-eighty-six-zero-zero-gamma."

"Nothing's working, sir. It's like someone hijacked the control systems."

"Captain!" someone else in the crew pit said, "Systems all over the ship are going haywire. Atmo's being vented into space; whole decks are losing air."

"What?"

"The crews are trying to move, but... Their access codes aren't working! They can't open the doors!"

As if on cue, the heavy blast doors at the entrance to the bridge came crashing down, sealing the crew on the command deck. Morux's face went red and it looked like he was going to hyperventilate. Then, finally, the obvious hit him and he turned to look at Tavira.

"*You*," he gasped, "What did you do to my ship?"

She clasped her hands behind her back like a proud Imperial captain and said, "This is *my* ship now. As I said before, follow my orders if you want to live."

"This is outrageous!" Morux snapped. "You can't just *steal* a fully-manned star destroyer!"

"I think I just did," Tavira said proudly, though she could see the handful of guards on the bridge reaching slowly for their weapons. "You should tell your men to stand down."

Morux's face was starting to turn from red to an interesting maroon. It had been clear for a while that Teradoc hadn't attracted the best talent to his warlord fleet, and Tavira wasn't surprised when Morux tried to grab his pistol. The

other guards raised their weapons too but none of them got off a shot. She'd instructed her guards- organic and mechanical- to choose a single target to kill when the time came, and each one carried out his or its orders with timely precision. Rossk was the one who had the honor of dropping Morux with a single shot to the head. The captain crumpled face-down on the middle of the bride, in front of all his shocked and terrified crew.

Tavira marched over to the Morux's body, picked up his pistol, and stuck it under the waistband of her belt. She looked down at all his crew, smiled, and said, "Please remain where you are. If you have sidearms, hand them over to my people without a fight."

Happily, she trotted over to the tactical station, where Rossk had just grabbed the lieutenant's weapon. The young man stuttered, "What happens to us now?"

She tapped him playfully on the chest. "I haven't decided yet. If you prove useful today, I might just keep you."

"K-Keep me?"

Tavira ignored him and looked at the tactical holo. Grant had stared moving; he was doing the obvious thing and angling for *Corvus*. *Grey Wolf* would be able to change course and intercept him before he reached the target, but just barely. In chasing Grant, *Grey Wolf* would have to turn its aft to *Invidious*. Tavira had to admit it made a very tempting target.

She tapped her earpiece and said, "Report, Billibango."

"Everything's under control, Captain. The crew are starting to drop."

"Keep their atmo low but stable. What about the rest?"

"I've re-routed gunnery and helm control to the auxiliary stations. We've got people in place should be able to control everything from there. Don't think we'll be at peak effectiveness, though."

"I was prepared for that. Give us forward speed, Billibango. I want to go after *Grey Wolf*."

"Understood, Captain."

As she tapped off her earpiece, the comm lieutenant interjected, saying, "We're, ah, being hailed, um, Captain. It's *Oriflamme*."

“Excellent,” Tavira said, and jauntily pranced back to the comm station. “Please, put the grand admiral on.”

The old man’s head and shoulders appeared before her. She said, “This ship is now mine, Admiral. Thank you for fulfilling your part of the bargain.”

“As you can see, I’m going after the drag ship now,” Grant said.

“I do see, and I just told my, ah, helmsman to come and help.”

“You have clearance to launch your corvette. Why haven’t you done it already?”

Tavira chuckled and leaned a little closer to the holo. “There’s nothing to do, Admiral. The late Captain Morux was actually glad when I said I wanted to launch *Courtesan* before entering the system; he probably thought it would weaken my hand here. More fool him.”

“What are you saying, girl?”

“I’m saying I had *Courtesan* swing around to the far side of the system and enter from the opposite vector. My people should be arriving at Orron III as we speak.”

The hyperspace ride to the Orron system had given Wedge Antilles and Soontir Fel the chance to calm down, talk to each other, and come up for a plan for when they arrived at their destination. Both agreed that some kind of trap was likely, so they avoided coming into the system on the direct vector and plotted a series of round-about microjumps to bring them close to the planet.

When they finally did arrive, they nestled their X-wings close to the surface of the planet’s second moon, which was currently looking down on the continent where their data indicated Syal was being held. From their hiding place they performed thorough scans and determined that the only ships in orbit were automated CSA drone barges moving cargo.

They were about to move when sensors reported that two big vessels had appeared far out on the system’s edge: one Imperial star destroyer and one interdictor, which promptly fired its gravity well projectors to full strength. With the drag field now up over most of the system it would get a lot harder to escape.

Wedge and Fel had spent some fifteen minutes verbally deliberating their options when another star destroyer was pulled into the interdiction field. As first destroyer moved slowly to intercept, Fel spotted a JV-7 Imperial escort shuttle- a nimbler, more combat-capable version of the standard tri-wing *Lambda*-class shuttle- was heading toward Orron III from a vector that suggested it had come from the first destroyer. At the same time, a third star destroyer dropped in-system.

"I think we've run out of time," Fel said. "We have to move now."

"We still don't know what's going on with those Impstars. They'd look like friends."

"Whatever they're up to it doesn't involve us. We need to get to Syal before that shuttle does."

"Want to shoot it down?"

Fel thought for a moment. Detouring to intercept it would take time, but it was close enough that its crew would certainly notice two X-wings cutting to the target ahead of them.

Before he could give a reply, his sensor board lit up. A new ship decanted from hyperspace right in Orron III's orbit and it was barely slowing down as it careened toward the planet.

"What is that ship?" asked Wedge.

"It doesn't matter. We're out of time."

Fel kicked his thrusters to full and made sure his torpedoes were armed. Wedge was right behind him and together they soared toward Orron III's brown-gold face. The newcomer's engines were burning dead ahead, and Fel's sensors made a quick identification.

"*Marauder*-class corvette," he said. "Standard CSA picket ship type."

"I'm betting that one's *not* on official business," said Wedge. "Can you get a lock on it?"

"It's not in range yet." Fel dropped his targetting reticule on the thruster-glow. "I might try a torp anyway."

"That thing'll have shields."

"It's heading straight for where Syal is. We have to stop it."

"I know, I just- ah, stang it."

Fel saw it too, with his sensors and his eyes. Marauder corvettes weren't big ships, and their design had swapped carrying capacity for guns and maneuverability; nonetheless, a standard ship of its class was built to hold a squadron of twelve starfighters.

A full dozen dropped from the ship's ventral hangar bay, spun around, and raced toward Wedge and Fel. They were a motley assemblage of ships- Fel spotted Authority IRDs, T-wing interceptors, Z-95 Headhunters, a V-wing from the Clone Wars- and they were all heading his way.

"Are you ready, Wedge?" he called.

"Do I get a choice?"

"I'm afraid not." He dropped his reticule on the profile of the nearest Headhunter; the ship was coming fast and he got a torpedo lock. "I'll take a Z-95."

"I'll get an IRD," said Wedge.

They let their torpedoes fly and broke formation; the enemy ships broke too and began chasing targets. Two against twelve was awful odds, but they had no choice. Two again twelve, the best starfighter pilots in the galaxy charged into the fray.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ETTI IV

Lankar Dright wasn't going to die today. He kept telling himself that as he pulled himself out of the rubble and hurried out of the tunnel, brushing soot and dirt from his clothes the entire time. He wasn't going to die today, not for the CSA, not for the Empire, and certainly not for the co-called New Republic.

As he crawled out into open he was assaulted by the scents and sounds of war. He smelled the smoke and ash and heard people screaming in the distance. The earth seemed to rhythmically shudder under his feet and when his eyes found the source his jaw dropped and his legs locked in place. A giant AT-AT walker, towering high above the nearby buildings, was making its way through the estate grounds. The twin laser cannons on its chin sprayed out red destruction and tore smoking gashes in buildings. Dright watched the metal monster lurch along until a pair of speeder bikes piloted by white-armored scout troopers whipped past overhead and sent him sprawling to the ground in panic.

It was shocking, horrible, impossible: war on Etti IV, garden world of the Corporate Sector. Prex Go'thal had been an idiot to try and drag the CSA out of its peaceful isolation and Dright had been an idiot to agree to help.

Dright pushed himself to his feet and ran. That huge star destroyer that had replaced the sky didn't seem to be firing into the energy shield anymore, but he didn't hear TIE fighters howling overhead, which probably meant the umbrella was still up.

He remembered where the shield generator facility was, at the center of the estate, half-buried in a protected structure right next to the main tower where they'd been having their stupid conference. Lanchenzoor was a fool for not surrendering the rebel leaders immediately and begging the Empire for mercy; it was the only chance any of them had of getting through this alive.

Dright ducked behind the corner of one intact building, made sure no one was coming for him, then reached into his robes and pulled out his last vial of spice. As the ground quaked under the AT-AT's feet and explosions sent shudders through air, Dright dropped a gel into his mouth and swallowed. He breathed in, breathed out, and felt the spice take effect. Energy shot through his old body. When he stepped out of cover the whole battle-scene seemed to play out in ultra-detailed slow-motion. He could see every last speeder bike swoop overhead, every last laser streak through the air.

The first kick he got from the spice wouldn't last long. He started running. He sprinted down debris-choked lanes and made his way toward the tower. The Imperials were all trying to converge on it but progressing slowly; for some reason Lanchenzoor's security team had actually decided to put up a fight. When Dright got to the square facing the shield's power generator, secure and innocuous inside its sunken building, he saw one of those other Imperial walkers, the smaller two-legged kind, stalking toward the entrance.

As he crouched behind the hood of a parked and abandoned landspeeder, Dright watched as a pair of speeder bikes mounted by Espos swooped down from above. The walker- an AT-ST, that was it- fired off chains of laserfire but missed the fast-moving targets. One speeder whipped past its flank, as it passed Dright spotted something small and dark spin through the air. A second later, the grenade exploded, tearing an ugly gash in the walker's head. The machine wobbled pathetically on its two spindly legs before falling to the ground.

They were fools to put this kind of fight, but brave ones. Dright gathered his waning spice-induced strength and ran across the square, skirting around the wreckage of the AT-ST.

He heard laserfire crackle from somewhere and ducked low. When he reached the entrance to the generator building he threw himself against the doors-

-which refused to open. He swore at himself for an idiot and pounded on the permacrete panels, yelling at anyone inside to let him in. He heard more laserfire, turned, and saw a half-dozen stormtroopers charging from the far side of the square.

The door opened behind him. A hand grabbed the back of his robe and pulled himself inside. As the door slid shut behind him he found himself looking into the mirror-black visor of an Espo security man with captain's bars on his shoulder.

"Viceprex Dright!" the man sounded surprised. "Where is Viceprex Lanchenzoor?"

He had no idea and frankly didn't care. He just wanted to get to the generator control room. He spun the question back on the captain. "When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"She'd just arrived at the security center in the tunnels. Then we took a hit and lost outside communication."

That was too perfect. "She sent me," Dright lied. "She wants you to shut down the shield generator and surrender to the Imperials."

The captain's eyes were hidden behind his visor but his mouth twisted in a skeptical frown. "Are you certain, sir? The Viceprex's last order was to-"

"She couldn't let the Rebels know what she was planning," Dright snapped. "Now that she'd got them held secure in the tunnels she wants you to surrender. She'll give them up to the Imperials in exchange for our safety."

The captain still looked skeptical. Dright waved a hand at the doors. "Have you *seen* what's been going on outside, Captain? Your people are being slaughtered in a fight that isn't even theirs!"

Reluctantly, the captain nodded. "All right. Come with me, sir."

The captain led Dright deeper inside the generator complex. The Viceprex was shocked to see entire rooms crammed with dirty, cowering civilians; but of course, the estate had

thousands of staff who had even less business in this mess than Dright and the Espos.

When they reached the generator room, though, it was fully staffed by security men. As he made his way for the comm station, Dright called, "New orders from Lanchenzoor! She sent me to tell you! You're to shut down the defensive shield at once!"

The Espos just looked at him stupidly. It was like they *wanted* to die for nothing.

"Shut it down!" Dright repeated. "Shut it down now! You have your orders! Comm, hail that star destroyer!"

The comm officer, at least, knew what was good for him. He called up the destroyer and that kicked the others into action. As the hum of the generator began to fade, Dright spoke into the speaker grille, saying, "Attention Imperials, this is Viceprex Lankar Dright of the Corporate Sector Authority! We surrender! I repeat, we surrender! We'll hand over the Rebels! Just... stop shooting at us!"

Dright leaned over the console, panting, and waited for a reply. For a long, awful moment it seemed like the Imperials had ignored his request. He looked over his shoulder and asked, "You *did* kill the shield, didn't you?"

"That's right," said the Espo captain.

Then a voice on the comm said, "This is Grand Admiral Afsheen Makati. Please state your location, Viceprex."

"I'm at the shield generator station at the base of the tower complex." Unnecessarily, he repeated, "We surrender."

"Do you have the Rebel leaders with you?"

"No, but I can show you where they're being kept."

After a tiny pause, Makati said, "A stormtrooper team will be at your location in three minutes. Please provide them everything they ask for."

"Of course. I'll be right out."

Dright turned off the comm and marched back to the Espo leader. "You're coming with me, Captain."

The captain called in four more Espos and they followed Dright back to the main entrance. Dright hoped to drop them as soon as he was sure he'd be safe with the stormtroopers; these Espos seemed more devoted than most and they might

not act rationally when they learned Dright was selling out Lanchenzoor.

When he stepped out onto the square Dright nearly stopped in his tracks. Apparently ‘a stormtrooper team’ actually meant two dozen white-armored soldiers plus two AT-STs standing over the still-smoking corpse of their brother. Every weapon on every soldier and walker was pointed straight at Lankar Dright.

There was one exception. An Imperial officer in a gray uniform stood at the head of the stormtroopers column with his service pistol still in his holster. He called out, “Drop your weapons! All of you!”

The Espos didn’t hesitate to obey. With his hands in the air, Dright walked carefully to the officer and said, “I’m the Viceprex. I can give you what you need.”

The officer looked at him skeptically. “Were you part of these negotiations with the Rebels?”

“I... Well, yes, but a minor part. Prex Go’tal insisted I take part. It was his idea and I knew it was a bad one from the start.”

It wasn’t a very good argument; he knew it and so did the officer. As a pair of TIE fighters low howled overhead, the Imperial said, “Can you tell us how to reach the Rebels?”

“Oh, yes. They’re hiding in a security center beneath the estate. The Prex is with them.”

“How do we get there?”

Dright had studied Lanchenzoor’s maps. He pointed to a two-storey building on the far side of the square. “Go in there. You can access the tunnel system. All the passages connect to the security hub. From there you can reach the landing complex, anything.”

“We won’t be needing hangar access,” the officer said smoothly.

Dright wondered what he’d meant; then, as if on cue, he heard a massive explosion from the direction of the hangar.

“We just need to go into that tunnel?” asked the officer.

“Assuming it hasn’t collapsed, yes. From there it should be easy to find the Rebels, and all the collaborators.” He paused, then added, “The major collaborators. My role was minor, I assure you. *Very* minor.”

"I understand," the officer said, and threw up a hand signal to his stormtroopers. They immediately turned and began to march across the square.

Then, before the Viceprex could say anything else, the officer took his pistol from his holster and fired one shot into Lankar Dright's chest. Dright fell back and landed face-up on the hard ground, but he didn't feel a thing. The pain spreading outward from his torso overwhelmed everything else.

Over the empty roar in his ears he could, just vaguely, hear the retreating officer say, "Try to capture major targets alive. For all minor ones, shoot to kill."

Kasck Fre'leir and Reyan Dey'rylan bent close over the screen showing *Steadfast's* internal schematic. The russet-furred Bothan taped a claw and said, "We can take this garbage chute right up to the command tower. It'll be a tight fit, but we can do it."

"It's going to smell like a Nexu's butt," Dey'rylan said.

Kasck shrugged. "At least we won't have to worry about visitors. Plus, it drops us off on the same level as the bridge."

Close to Makati, but so far. "We can't just walk right in there."

"I know. But we can try waiting for a lull. Or we can hide in his quarters, they won't find us there. We just have to take out his droid first, and we already figured out how to do that."

Dey'rylan thought it over. Hiding in Makati's place until the battle was over might be the safest way to get to him, but it didn't do anything for Fey'lya, Organa, and all the other brave diplomats and rescue pilots they'd knowingly put at risk on this mission. Dey'rylan couldn't deny the responsibility he felt for that; even now, good Republic people were dying down there because he'd messed up, and he didn't want any more of them on his conscience.

"Let's call up Jekk and Sho-tev," said Kasck. "See where they are. They might be able to help us make a distraction."

"Hold on." Dey'rylan's eyes narrowed on the schematic. "See this? The command tower has a separate atmosphere control system from the rest of the ship."

"The whole tower's probably set up to operate as a sealed environment separate from the rest of the ship in case of emergencies."

"I really wish we'd read a manual on Impstars before getting on this thing."

"Consider it a crash course. I bet if we busted those things we could take Makati by surprise."

They really might; if they hid in the grand admiral's cabin they could wait until the atmo systems were shut down, then rush the short length to the bridge while everybody else was dizzy and gasping for breath.

"We'll need air masks somewhere," he said. "Though I doubt they'd be fit for Bothans."

"We'll rig up something. Just find us a storage locker."

"Okay, fine. I want to call Jekk and Sho-tev and give them a battle plan. It might take them a while to get to the command tower."

"I just hope they *can* get up there. After we blew the sensor package they're on the lookout for saboteurs."

"They'll be fine as long as nobody's taking off helmets," Dey'rylan said and brought out his comm.

He paused before turning it on. All this time they'd been talking about getting to the command deck, getting on the bridge, getting to Makati.

They'd never said a thing about getting out.

Dey'rylan knew he was being cowardly and sentimental. He should have given up on his own life the moment he stowed away aboard the troop carrier on Bonadan. Still, he couldn't help but wonder what it had been like for Sheer or Koth Melan, the moment when they really *knew* it was all over. He wondered if it had helped them accept the inevitable. He wondered if they were as scared deep down as he was now.

Then he shoved all that stupid stuff down and turn on his comm. "You guys reading me?"

"Loud and clear, boss," said Karr.

"I've got a plan. It's time to do what we came here for."

Avan Beruss held his breath as all six Rogue Squadron X-wings dove beneath the belly of the star destroyer *Steadfast*. Makati's flagship had stopped firing with its dorsal turbo-

lasers even before the shield dropped, but it didn't make the narrow space between the destroyer and the estate grounds below any safer. The Rogues bobbed and weaved around stray blasts from the TIEs swarming the same space as them, while the Imperial forces on the ground began fired skyward at the passing ships.

Avan swore as a stray shot from an AT-AT walker broke through his shields and skimmed his bottom-port S-foil. He gripped his control stick hard to steady his trembling ship as they soared out from beneath *Steaddfast* and began wheeling around for another run.

"Look at that hangar down there," Nrin called. "The Imps busted it wide open."

"That means our people have no way off ground," said Xarce.

"They will once we clear a space for our shuttles to land," said Hobbie, though he didn't sound too confident.

"Suggest we bust open some of those AT-ATs, boss," said Feylis. The sound of her voice gave him confidence, even now.

"Agreed," said Avan.

"Okay, Rouges," called Hobbie, "Split into two formations and we'll see if we can't clear the ground a little. Nrin, Feylis, on me."

Avan swung his X-wing around to take Wes Janson's port side, while Xarce settled on his left. As they aligned themselves for another run beneath the star destroyer, a voice crackled on their overhead comlinks.

"Hello, hello? Can anyone hear me? Any Republic ship, please respond!"

Avan had known that voice since he was a kid. Despite his current status as fighter jock, his father and aunt had both been Old Republic senators and ambitious young Leia Organa had been a frequent visitor to the Beruss estate.

"Leia, this is Rouge Squadron," Avan called. "What's your location?"

"Avan, is that you? We're burrowed safe for now. We heard the hangar's been hit."

"It's gone, but we've got evac shuttles on the way," Hobbie said. "Just let us clear you some ground."

"Any air support is welcome, Rogue Squadron," said another voice, possibly Borsk Fey'lya's.

"Okay, let's gun for it," Hobbie called. "Janson, you take the AT-AT at three o'clock. I'll take the one at twelve."

"Copy," said Janson. "Avan, Xarcce, lock your torps and get ready to blow."

The AT-AT was hard to miss, even with all the smoke spiraling up from the estate grounds. They were coming at it from behind, thankfully. Avan dropped his reticule on the walker's bulky body and set his torpedoes for double-fire.

"TIEs incoming from port," Nrin warned.

"Get ready to break once you let loose," Hobbie said. "On my mark. One, two, three, mark!"

Proton torpedoes shot through the air and the Rogues immediately scattered. A dozen TIE fighters poured sprays of green laserfire, and Avan spotted two torps burst in mid-air as he veered away. Two TIEs seemed to have gone straight for Janson and as all three ships wove and bobbed beneath *Steadfast's* oppressive bulk, Avan let loose a spray of red laserblasts that clipped one TIE on its solar panel and sent it falling to the ground. The other attempted to flee but Xarcce swooped in and nailed it with a laser-blast to the cockpit.

"Thanks for the help," Janson called as all three X-wing soared out from beneath the destroyer. "Hobbie, you there?"

"Just got one," the other pilot grunted.

"I saw we busted one AT-AT. Not sure about the other," said Nrin.

"Feylis, you there?" asked Avan as he scanned the skies. "Feylis?"

"Got two TIEs on me!" the woman cried. Avan's heart leaped in his stomach and he tried to find her X-wing. He spotted her and gunned his engines, nearly colliding with an A-wing flight as it chased a TIE Interceptor.

Feylis was doing her best to evade as the TIEs chased her over Etti IV's rolling fields, but they were still pummeling her aft shields with laserblasts. Avan didn't bother with quad-lasers; he waited for his first torp to lock on and immediately fired. The targetted TIE broke off Feylis to evade but couldn't outrun the torpedo.

Avan barely noticed. He switched to laser and began spraying the air around the last TIE, but the ship was surprisingly nimble and stayed close to Feylis through all her turns.

"Just hold on, Feylis," called Hobbie. "I'm the way."

"This guy's good, boss," Feylis grunted.

Avan was stifling muttered swears as he tried again and again to nail the damned TIE. When Hobbie got to her they could catch it in the pincer but that would take critical seconds and Feylis-

Feylis' upper port engine burst into flames. As her X-wing started to dip toward the fields below Avan shouted, "Eject! Eject now!"

"I've got it!" her staticky voice cried. "I've got it!"

The TIE landed another shot, and her X-wing exploded in a ball of tumbling flame. As Hobbie caught the TIE on its flank and tore apart its solar panel, Avan dived after what was left of Feylis. For a second, he saw nothing except fire and smoke and knew his world had ended; then the dark form of her parachute blossomed as her ejection seat, bobbing and twirling in the wind, fell toward the grass.

"She went EV!" Avan called. "Feylis, can you hear us? Is your comm on?"

He got nothing. He tried to swerve close to her parachute to see if she was okay, but the ground was coming up too fast. He pulled away as her seat hit the grass and her parachute spread like a blanket around it.

"We need to get a team down there!" Avan said as he settled on Hobbie's wing. "She might need medical."

"Don't worry, I'll call a shuttle down," said Hobbie. "Keep your head in the fight, Avan."

That was easy for him to say. Avan muttered swears as he flew back to meet Janson and Xarce.

"We missed that one AT-AT so we're going back for another pass," Janson called. "Get ready, Avan."

"I'll be fine," he said, knowing he couldn't be, not until the rescue team called and said Feylis was okay. But he followed Janson and Xarce anyway as they turned back toward *Steadfast* and the battleground beneath it.

They dove low over the estate to charge the AT-AT head-on. On Janson's order they locked torps and fired. As Avan let his fly, the AT-AT lifted its face toward them and unleashed a spray of red lasers to catch the torps coming toward it. Two burst into flames; then more lasers cut through the explosions. Avan's mind or reflexes were too slow; the shots ripped through the nose of his X-wing and send him tumbling.

He heard Janson shouting for him to eject but he was flying too low; the ground was coming too fast. As a torp slipped through and blew the head off the AT-AT, his X-wing screamed past. He tried to aim for a street, a square, some open space. Then his S-foil clipped the side of a building and sent him spinning. His head knocked hard against the side of his cockpit and that was all.

"Both AT-ATs down!" Wes Janson's voice crackled over the comlink in the small subterranean security center Viceprex Lanchenzoor had herded them into.

"Good job, Rogues," Leia congratulated, "But what happened to Avan? Was he hit?"

"That walker took his nose off. He went down too."

Leia had known Avan since their fathers were friends in the old Senate. "Did he eject? Is he okay?"

"Not sure... He went down... Still getting a beacon. Looks like he went crashed on the north end of the main promenade."

"The Imps will get to him fast there," muttered Winter at Leia's side.

Leia looked over to Lanchenzoor, who was talking to two of her Espos. "We have a pilot down. He needs recovery."

"We're in no situation to mount rescue missions," the old woman said sternly. "Maybe when your people come—"

"We don't have time for that," Leia insisted and picked up one of the blaster rifles on the central table. The security station, thankfully, had been well-stocked with arms of all kinds.

"Princess!" Fey'lya snapped. "What do you think you're doing? You can't go out there!"

"Avan is down! He's—"

“A soldier who knew his duty. You’re too important to risk.”

“He’s right, Princess,” Tresk Im’nel said firmly.

Leia looked to Winter for support. The other woman pursed her lips but said nothing; she didn’t know what to say.

Before Leia could come up with some response, the door to the north tunnel branch slid open. Leia turned, expecting more Espos. Instead, white stormtrooper armor gleamed in the dim light.

“Surrender!” the lead trooper called.

Leia raised her rifle and shot off the first reply. As the soldier in the doorway was knocked back more surged to replace him. The cramped chamber was suddenly filled with laserfire as Lanchenzoor’s Espos pushed forward to combat the Imperials and cover their boss’s escape down the south tunnel.

Leia and Winter grabbed blasters and fell in after them. After reaching the security station, both of them had torn the long skirts off their gowns for better movement, figuring the Republic could eat the wardrobe cost if it kept them alive. Fey’lya and the other diplomats followed Lanchenzoor and Go’tal got to the south door.

It took the Viceprex a few long seconds to punch in the code that would open the door. It slid open before her and she took one step into the dark; then a stray red laser-blast came from behind and took her in the head.

Leia gasped and rushed to her side as Lanchenzoor dropped, but when she got there it was clear the woman was dead. A hand grabbed her shoulder and she looked up at Fey’lya.

“We have to leave her,” the Bothan said, canines bared. “Come! *Now!*”

As Fey’lya led the party down the south tunnel, Leia grabbed the nearest Espo and said, “We have grenades, don’t we? Thermal detonators?”

The man pulled a sphere off his belt and nodded.

“Wait until we’re all out, then bring this thing down on top of them,” Leia said, then added, “But make sure you get out too.”

“That was the plan,” the Espo said, then pulled himself away. Leia watched his back as he ran to help the other

security guards hold back the stormtroopers for a little longer. She wondered why they did it; if they had anything to gain except death.

Then another hand took her, Winter's. Her friend pulled her along, up the tunnel, toward whatever daylight entrance lay ahead. After less than a minute of running, the whole tunnel shook, and Leia could hear broken rock and muffled cries far behind them.

A few Espos managed to catch up with them before they made it out. The air reeked of smoke and ozone and TIEs roared overhead beneath *Steadfast's* oppressive bulk but, at least in this alley they'd surfaced in, there were no walkers bearing down on them.

"What happens now?" one of the Espos asked as they crowded into the alley. He was looking at Go'thal and Malor'dacan but neither of them seemed to have any idea.

Leia checked the charge on her blaster rifle and said, "We've got a pilot down. We need to get him."

"Leia, don't be a fool!" hissed Fey'lya.

"Stay here if you want," Leia said, "But he needs our help."

She turned and marched for the alley mouth. Winter was right behind her, of course. She dared look back when she'd stepped into the street: Winter behind her, and no one else.

It didn't matter. Together, they set off into the battlefield.

Dey'rylan was so happy to get out of that waste shaft that he didn't bother to make sure the path was clear before he rolled out onto the maintenance hallway. It was, thankfully, very empty, and if the schematics he'd pounded into his head were right, they should be very close to the command deck and the grand admiral's cabin.

Kasck was right behind him. The two Bothans crouched on the floor and stayed there. This hallway had no security cameras and the adjoining passageway at the far end didn't seem to have any foot traffic.

They moved without words. They clutched the small pistols they'd stolen from the storage locker and made their way to the end of the corridor, then made a right. There was a doorway on the far end, and on the other side of that door

was the hallway to Grand Admiral Makati's quarters. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing if anyone was on the other side of the door.

They crept up to the frame and placed themselves on either side. Kasck punched the controls. The door slid open. No one walked through. Dey'rylan, still crouched low, peeked his head through the gap. His heart skipped a beat when he saw a moving body, but the officer had his back turned and was walking away.

He waved Kasck through the door. As it slid shut behind him they crept along silently, a safe distance from the officer, and waited until he'd turned a corner and disappeared.

Dey'rylan stood in front the grand admiral's door and began working the lock. Kasck stayed down, clutching his pistol with both hands, ears pricked up to listen, but no one else came.

Dey'rylan's heart was pounding in his chest but his mind was clear. It took him less than a minute to override the lock's security sequence. He kicked Kasck gently with the heel of his boot, warning the other Bothan to be ready. He watched from the corner of his eye as Kasck pocketed his pistol and took out the magnetic ion charged clamp they'd also taken from the storage room.

Then he opened the door.

Kasck planted one paw on the floor and pushed himself feet-first through the threshold. He landed in a crouch, pivoted to his right, and threw the magnetic clamp with the same impossible speed he threw his needles.

It hit Makati's droid square in the chest and immediately discharged its stored ion energy, overloading the machine's circuits and freezing it in place. As Dey'rylan closed the door behind them, he noticed with a start that the blaster cannon in the droid's arm had already halfway extended.

"Nice throw," he whispered.

"Thanks." Kasck popped to his feet. The grand admiral's quarters weren't large, and it took them under a minute to search the place and make sure there were no other guests.

They went back into the main room and looked at the droid, frozen like a metal statue right before it could fire a killing shot.

Dey'rylan asked, "How long is he disabled for again?"

"Don't know, but that charge should keep it out for at least an hour."

"You're sure about that?"

"Pretty sure."

"Okay. Well if you don't mind, I'm not going to try walking in front of it any time soon."

"Yeah. Me neither. You want to call Jekk?"

"Sure thing." Dey'rylan took out his comlink and turned it on. "How's it coming, guys?"

"On our way up now," Karr said. "Had to do a little smooth-talking to a security team but we're good."

Dey'rylan chose to take Karr's word on that. "We're up in the grand admiral's personal quarters now."

"Sounds fancy," commented Ekrhine.

For the first time, Dey'rylan really *looked* at the cabin around him. It was, if anything, rather drab and plain, without any shows of luxury. The only personal touch he saw was a series of two-dimensional pictures framed on the far wall.

"Listen," he said, "We'll camp here until you guys get in position. Sound good?"

"Sounds good. Talk to you soon. Say, twenty minutes."

Dey'rylan pocketed his link and turned to Kasck. "Well. All we have to do now is hope the grand admiral doesn't take a nap in the next hour."

"I doubt that'll be a problem."

"Well, then I hope he doesn't call his droid," Dey'rylan said, then took a wary step away from the thing. "You're *sure* it doesn't wake up for at least an hour?"

"It shouldn't, but I can't say for sure. Somebody's clearly done modifications on that thing."

Dey'rylan was tempted to just shoot the machine in the back of the head and fry it for good.

Then he had a better idea.

"We've got twenty minutes," he told Kasck. "That should be enough time. I want to try something."

The arrival of *Vengeance* had immediately turned the Battle of Etti IV on its head. Within minutes the Mon Calamari

cruiser *Mon Remora* had been destroyed; *Mon Delindo*, *Mon Maria*, and their support ships were scrambling to escape from the massive super star destroyer, but they refrained from jumping to hyperspace, knowing that if they did, *Emancipator* and the Rebel leaders on the planet were doomed.

The remaining two Mon Cal ships split in different directions and tried to run. *Vengeance's* sole supporting star destroyer tried to keep *Mon Delindo* pinned against the planet while *Vengeance* herself went after *Mon Maria*. Two assault frigates and a bulk cruiser stayed behind *Mon Maria* to cover its retreat, but against *Vengeance's* overwhelming firepower, little could be done. All three died quickly, leaving *Mon Maria* alone to flee. *Vengeance* crept after it, pounding its aft shields with long-range turbolaser fire as it climbed away from Etti IV's orbit and outside its gravity well.

That was the situation when Garm Bel Iblis arrived.

His reconnaissance ships at the edge of the system had been watching the battle for hours. At the beginning, it looked as though Admiral Burke's forces held a significant advantage and wouldn't even need any help. Then *Vengeance* had come and the situation suddenly became hopeless.

Strangely enough, that was what made Garm Bel Iblis consider jumping his fleet in. He'd made a career in hopeless battles, but that career hadn't lasted thirty years because he'd charged stupidly into every fight.

So he watched, and waited, and when he decided the time was right he finally he told his crew to jump.

They dropped out of hyperspace right on top of *Vengeance*: six Rendilli dreadnaughts and a single *Venator*-class star destroyer. They were all vintage warships, from the Clone Wars or earlier, but their weapons had been newly refitted and their crews knew how to fight. On Bel Iblis' order, they opened fire as one.

As he stood on the bridge of his star destroyer *Fang Zar*, Bel Iblis watched the initial missile volleys tear through the super star destroyer's unshielded starboard flank. Black durasteel ruptures and debris and flame poured out into space.

The two foremost dreadnaughts, *Harrier* and *Peregrine*, bombarded the closest line of missile launchers before the Imperials could return fire. When the launchers' magazines detonated, the explosion poured so much debris into space that the dreadnaughts had to pull back from getting torn up by shrapnel.

"General, it's working!" Sena Leikvold Midanyl said excitedly at his side "We've taken out their starboard shields!"

"What about *Mon Maria*?"

"She's holding position, sir."

"Then comm her and tell her to join the fight if she can. Tell helm to take us around. All ships hold tight to the starboard side so they can't bring their other turbolasers to bear. When I say tight I mean as close as possible without scraping paint off."

"Understood. Our next target?"

"Do they have shields up around their bridge?"

"They do, sir."

"Well they won't have them for long. Tell all ships to converge on the command station. We've got a super star destroyer to kill."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ORRON III

As he dove into Orron III's atmosphere, Soontir Fel dropped himself on the rear of two IRD fighters. He popped off a torpedo, his second of the fight. Its target peeled off to evade and dropped chaff behind it. The torp flew into the chaff and exploded, filling Fel's view with a fireball. He accelerated, made sure his forward shields were on full, and speared through the debris, firing madly ahead as he did. He caught the IRD by surprise; laser blasts punctured its bubble cockpit and the fighter began tumbling to the endless fields below.

"One more down!" he called. He couldn't spare a look at his scanner to see where Wedge was or how he was doing; as he dropped on the trail of the last remaining IRD, laser blasts began to whip past his cockpit and shudder against his shields. A Clone Wars-vintage P-38 flying wing had dropped behind him. It was a heavy-hitter but sluggish. Fel pulled himself into a steep climb, toward the stars shining bright in the twilit sky. The IRD raced free ahead but Fel kept climbing and the P-38 strained to follow. G-forces pinned him to his cockpit chair and made it hard to breathe.

Just as his vision started to fog, Fel killed his engines. His X-wing plunged butt-first toward the planet; the P-38 shot ahead. Without waiting for a lock, Fel sent one more torp up like a flare; the P-38 flew straight into it and exploded brilliantly.

Fel flipped around with his direction repulsors, nose-over-tail, and when he leveled out he fired his engines again. For the moment nobody was shooting at him and he checked his

scanners: Wedge was down below, picking off an old R-41 Starchaser as he tried to keep close behind the Marauder corvette that was still diving toward the surface along with a Y-wing two-seater on either flank. The IRD that Fel had been chasing was going after Wedge, as was the other Z-95 Headhunter.

Fel dove after them. As Wedge shot down the Starchaser he popped off another torp for good measure, which shot straight toward the corvette and impacted on its shields. Wedge broke off pursuit before the Headhunter and IRD could fire on him. The two snubfighters moved to follow, and the Headhunter edged into Fel's torpedo range. He let another warhead fly, but before he could watch its track his shields shuddered with more laser-blasts.

He cursed and dropped into an evasive roll. Coming from his aft-port were two T-wing interceptors. Lightly shielded and not well-armed, they were nonetheless fast and nimble dogfighters. Fel cut his engines again and dropped altitude but they stayed on him. Another round of lasers cut through his shields; his X-wing shuddered and his R2 unit wailed alarm, telling him his upper port thrust engine was on fire.

He shut off power to the engine and tried to compensate, though he knew his maneuvers would be sluggish. One T-wing popped off a missile and Fel immediately released a chaff plume. The chaff caught the missile, but the concussion force still rippled through the atmosphere, and his R2 unit told him his upper starboard engine was failing too.

He couldn't win a dogfight with only two engines. Fel swung his shuddering fighter around in a series of scissor maneuvers, alternately killing and gunning his thrusters in the hopes of dropping behind one or both of the T-wings. All the while he fell closer and closer to the surface.

Suddenly Wedge called, "Soontir! Break port!"

Fel did just that. A streak of laser blasts cut right over his head, then caught the lead T-wing in the port engine nacelles. As the T-wing struggled, Wedge bore down on it, firing another volley that caught its nose and sent it into a spin.

The second T-wing tried to evade its falling partner. Fel completed a sharp turn and cut in from the side; the T-wing veered sharply up to avoid his volley-

-and collided with the other fighter. The two T-wings exploded spectacularly, leaving Wedge and Fel to soar wing-to-wing away.

There was no time to celebrate. The corvette was almost at its target and Fel did his best to keep up with Wedge as his second thruster started to fail.

"Soontir! Can you handle it?" Wedge called.

"I'll be fine!" He snapped. "We have to shoot it down!"

"Or at least cripple it," Wedge added. "See up ahead? Those Y-wings are dropping behind to cover it."

"Arm your torps and blow them away."

"Sounds like a plan."

It felt strange to be flying *against* Y-wings again. He hadn't done that since Brentaal, when he'd dropped his guard and the turret gunner in General Salm's backseat had nailed him with an ion blast and ended his Imperial career.

He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. He and Wedge kept bobbing and weaving best they could, evading the fire the Y-wings were sewing back at them. Fel released one torpedo; the Y-wing released chaff to catch it. As the resulting explosion buffeted the Y-wing's aft, Fel gave his engines one last kick and nailed the Y-wing's port engine pylon with a hail of lasers. The pylon exploded and the Y-wing tumbled to the fields below.

"I got mine!" Fel called. "Do you have yours?"

"We're good!" Wedge called and he dropped directly behind the corvette. "Let's knock this thing out of the sky!"

Fel cut speed to join Wedge behind the corvette-

-and his second engine exploded. He shook so violently only his crash webbing kept his helmet from being cracked on the side of his cockpit. Wedge was shouting something, he wasn't sure what. Fel killed all power to his topside engines and tried to level it out. His fighter steadied enough for him to see the corvette glowing ahead, the fields below, Wedge on his wing-

Then he heard his brother-in-law shouting, "Soontir, evade! Evade!"

One more snubfighter, an old V-wing, fell from the sky, weapons blazing. Fel's R2 unit let out a dying wail. Another engine exploded as his fighter fell.

Should have kept count, he thought, dumbfounded.

Then his hand found the new, familiar feeling of his ejection lever. He didn't have time to think. He pulled, and his cockpit roof exploded away. He shot into the sky, and for a moment it felt just like he was floating in space like at Bandomeer. Then the planet below took over, and he fell.

Syal Antilles Fel watched as the Marauder corvette sailed low over their compound. Together with LaRone and his men, she'd been standing outside, watching the fight in the long twilight above. Marcross had received a call saying that their pickup team was on the way, but what they saw wasn't what any of them had been expecting. The corvette was being chased by two snubfighters, and a third fighter had dived down and shot down one the pursuers. The second pursuer had popped off a torpedo that exploded the corvette's aft right engine, and instead of setting down in the field near their hilltop it careened past them, trailing smoke, while the two remaining snubfighters dueled overhead.

"I'm going to grab that old speeder in the garage," Brightwater said. "I want to check that crash site."

"Do you think the pilot ejected?" asked Quiller.

"I saw a 'chute." Brightwater tapped the built-in macro-binoculars of his scout trooper helmet.

Grave had his own pair of binoculars and brought them to his eyes as he scanned the dogfight above them. "One of those ships looks like an X-wing."

"An X-wing?" asked Syal. The craft immediately made her think of her brother.

As Brightwater dashed off for his speeder, Marcross asked, "What about the Marauder?"

Grave turned around and tracked the corvette. "Looks like it's setting down. I see smoke from the engines."

Syal hugged herself tightly. "Are *any* of these ships your commander's?"

An awkward silence passed between them. LaRone said, "Marcross, try making a call. See if they can tell us what the kark is going on."

"Gladly," Marcross hobbled eagerly into the communications shed. Just as he disappeared, an explosion boomed

high above them. They all looked up to see one starfighter tumbling from the sky while the other, the one with an X-wing's bottom profile, soared away.

For a second it looked like the crashing ship would fall into the nearby fields. Then Syal realized it might fall closer.

"Oh, fierfek," Quiller barked. "Take cover!"

LaRone jumped into the communications bunker. Grave, the further away, hesitated, and ran for the cover of the garage. Quiller went after LaRone and Syal, too, hesitated for a long awful moment before running after Grave as fast as she could.

She'd expected the starfighter to fall on the compound like a fiery comet; instead it fell in pieces. Chunks of shrapnel tore chunk out of buildings. Durasteel shards clattered like knives around her, she couldn't keep from screaming. Somewhere something big hit the ground and exploded; the entire compound washed over with heat.

Syal fled the compound edge, hands over his head and neck. She got to the rim of the hilltop when she dared turn back and look at the damage the crashing fighter had wrought.

She saw smoke and fire, but in the dim light they were stuck in, she had a hard time telling anything else. Then she saw something above the compound: three forward lights on the wingtips of yet another approaching ship.

Something else exploded in the compound and she panicked. Cradling her stomach in both hands she stumbled down the hill and into the grass.

There was no obvious place to land, so Wedge shut down his thrust engines, closed his S-foils, and lowered his X-wing into the middle of the field. The tall wheat-grass was blown outward by his repulsors and crunched beneath his landing gear. He quickly opened the cockpit, pulled off his helmet, and jumped to the ground.

He had no idea where Fel was. He only knew that the V-wing he'd been fighting had crashed into the compound that sat like an island in the middle of the fields, and if Syal was anywhere, it had to be there.

If he'd killed her by accident when he'd downed the V-wing-

Wedge cursed himself and his thoughts. There was only one way to find out and there was no point in panicking until he learned the truth. He took out his service pistol, made sure it had a good charge, and began pushing his way through the grass toward the compound's smoke-signal.

He only got a few steps into the grass before he stopped. He held his breath and listened. On a world like this, there was no background-noise of speeder traffic or chattering people or distant starship engines. Aside from the low crackling of fire at the compound, there was no sound at all. There wasn't even wind to stir the grass.

He heard a cracking sound, and the shifting of wheat-stalks as a body passed through. He spun to face the direction of the sound and raised his pistol. He paused, listened. There was no sound and for a second he thought he'd just imagined it. Then he heard the crack of a stem underfoot and called, "Halt! Don't move!"

He heard more rustling, but no footsteps. He lowered his voice, tried not to sound panicked, and said, "Step toward my voice. Do it slowly. Come on."

He heard footsteps and saw wheat-heads shift ahead of him. Suddenly a woman stepped into view right in front of him. She had short-cut dark hair and a tired expression. With both hands, she cradled the pregnant swell of her stomach.

She squinted to see him in the gloom. Her voice shook in disbelief as she said, "Wedge? Is that you?"

He remembered that voice. After twenty years he'd barely remembered what she looked like, but the *voice* was unchanged. He dropped his gun to his side and stepped close. He put a hand on her shoulder, squeezed it tight, assured himself it was really his sister and that he wasn't going mad.

"Oh, Syal," he breathed, "It *is* you! It's really you!"

"Wedge," she muttered, and let her face fall against his shoulder. He snaked both hands around to touch her back. His body shook with something; laughter or tears, he wasn't sure. Syal clasped him around his waist and muttered, "Oh, Wedge, I don't believe this. This has to be a dream."

"No. No, it's not a dream." He pushed her away and looked into her eyes. He remembered that blue, too. "I came here with Soontir."

"Soontir?" Her eyes widened. "Was he shot down?"

"Yes, but he ejected."

"We have to find him!"

"I know. We'll get him, Syal, I promise, and then—"

He had no idea what happened then. None at all. They couldn't fit three people in one X-wing, and he had no idea what was going on with the Marauder corvette, or that escort shuttle, or the people who'd been holding her captive.

It was the stuff he should have thought of before he jumped after Fel to Orron III, but it was too late to change that now.

"Come on, Wedge," She took his hand. "We have to get back to the compound."

"The compound?"

"I ran after the crash. I was scared. But we have to get back there. They might be—"

"The people who captured you?" he gaped. "Syal, we have to get *away* from them!"

"No, Wedge, you don't understand." She tugged his hand again.

"Of course I understand! Syal, those are *Isard's* people!"

For a second she looked confused; then she shook her head and insisted, "I don't know it all myself, Wedge, but it's okay. I don't have to be afraid of them."

Before Wedge could respond he heard the sound of another body moving through the field. No; multiple bodies. He pulled Syal close to him and raised his weapon; it sounded like they were coming from everywhere at once.

Then a voice said behind him, "Drop the gun, flyboy."

He froze. He didn't do anything until he felt the cold tip of a blaster muzzle on the back of his head. Then, finally, he dropped his pistol. To his amazement, the blaster arrested its fall in mid-air. Then it jumped up over his head. Still holding Syal's hand, Wedge turned around slowly to see his own gun leveled straight at him.

The man holding it had a second gun in his other hand. A horizontal scar cut below his right eye and his grin was like a knife-slash.

"Syal..." Wedge breathed.

"I... I don't know him..." Her voice trembled.

"I wouldn't expect you to, but I do know you, darling. No offense, but I liked the old haircut better." The scarred man's dark eyes flitted to Wedge. "And you... You look familiar... Maybe it's just the flight suit..."

Wedge waited and said nothing, but it didn't help. The man's grin got even bigger and he said, "Oh, I can't believe this. Wedge Antilles, rebel war hero, in the flesh. They pulled out all the stops for this rescue mission, didn't they?" He lowered Wedge's gun to his side but kept his own hefted. "This is amazing. She's going to *love* my present."

"You're never taking us to Isard," Wedge hissed.

"Isard?" the scarred man laughed. "Isard can go suck vacuum. You can look forward to your *new* master- Captain Leonia Tavira."

Fel woke up with a stab of pain and a shout. His limbs spasmed; one hand slapped to the source of pain at his neck. His palm slapped only flesh. His eyes popped open and he found himself staring upward at a cloudless violet sky rising past the tall heads of moitonless wheat-stalks. His limbs dropped to the dirt but kept rattling with tiny trembles. Someone had injected him with raw adrenaline.

"At least you're awake," a voice said. Fel rolled his head one side and saw a faceless white stormtrooper helmet staring back at him. He jerked upright but a pair of hands pinned his shoulders to the ground. Another head appeared over him, this one hidden by a scout trooper's mask.

"Where is she?" Fel barked. "Where is my *wife*?"

"It really is you," said another voice. This one sounded faintly amused. A man crouched over him, blocking out the sky. This one had no helmet on. Fel recognized his face as that of the man in the recording that had called him here.

One arm jumped out for the man's throat; the scout trooper wrestled it down.

"Listen, we're not your enemy," the maskless man insisted.

Fel wheezed, "Where... is... Syal?"

"Grave's looking for her now," said the one in the stormtrooper helmet.

The scout said, "She ran when that V-wing crashed down, but we'll find her. Don't worry."

Fel's mind flicked back to the fight over the field. "What happened to the corvette? Where's-" He almost said *Syal's brother*, but the less his captors knew the better.

"The X-wing knocked the corvette down. It had to land," said the one without a helmet. "Hopefully it *stays* down."

"That ship... Not Isard's?"

"I don't think so. And *we're* not Isard's either."

"Who then? Zsinj? Teradoc?"

The man gave a long, long sigh. "I was hoping to have this conversation in different circumstances..."

"Hey," said the one with the stormie helmet. "Just got a call from Marcross. He says the admiral's got our location and he's on his way."

"At least we've got a ship off this rock," said the scout trooper. "Come on, let's get the flyboy on his feet."

The scout and the stormtrooper took him by the shoulders and hoisted him up. His legs were still trembling and he had to grab onto their arms to keep from falling. Now that he was upright he could look above the top of the grass and see the stout hilltop not far away. Smoke was rising and there were still fires burning there too.

"The V-wing?" Fel asked.

"That's right," said the one without a mask.

"And... the other X-wing?"

"Think it landed over by the corvette, I'm not sure."

"We've got incoming!" announced the scout. He stabbed his free hand toward the sky and Fel followed it to see the three forward-facing wing-mounted light-emplacements of a JV-7 escort shuttle.

"You should be honored, Baron," the stormtrooper said. "He came down here for you personally."

He. Not Isard, but that didn't make Fel feel better.

"Who?" he rasped.

His captors gave no response. The shuttle set down at the base of the hill and dimmed its forward lights. Fel's captors half-dragged him up to the shuttle; one of their own, a man leaning against a metal crutch, waved, and the one without a helmet waved back. The shuttle's landing ramp lowered and

two more stormtroopers walked down first. Then, inexplicably, came two beings with their faces hidden by woven brown robes. They were far too short to be human, but Fel could tell nothing else about them.

Then, finally, came a human in the white uniform and gold epaulets of an Imperial Grand Admiral. But as he stepped closer Fel saw that he wasn't human at all. His skin was tinted blue, and his eyes were red and glowing.

He took Fel's breath away. He'd seen that man once before, a long time ago, and it had planted the first seeds of doubt about the Empire's noble mission. In time those doubts had flowered into a complete defection to the Rebel Alliance. He'd never even heard the man speak, but he'd already changed Soontir Fe's life forever.

"Hello, Baron Fel," the alien said. "My name is Grand Admiral Thrawn. And we have much to talk about."

Another volley of turbolaser fire collided with *Grey Wolf's* rear shields. The deck shook under Niriz's feet, but the shields held.

"*Invidious* sill hasn't launched any fighters," Lieutenant Vredan reported. "I don't understand, sir."

"We should count ourselves lucky they're having problems," Niriz breathed. Right now that star destroyer was doing nothing more than nibble on their heels; the real threat lay dead ahead.

Grand Admiral Grant had turned *Oriflamme* so that one broadside faced *Grey Wolf* and the other *Corvus*. The interdicator, while still keeping its gravity wells, had begun a retreat toward Orron III. Grant, in turn, was giving chase while at the same time positioning himself to absorb attacks from *Grey Wolf's* forward guns. At the same time, he'd launched his full wing of snubfighters that were tangling with *Grey Wolf's* own and providing *Invidious* with a badly-needed fighter screen. All in all, Grant's defenses were spread too thin trying to protect two ships.

Niriz saw his advantage. He knew what Thrawn would have done with it. He told Vredan, "Launch the missile boats. Send two squads of TIEs as escorts and the squad of Starwings behind them."

Vredan had been with them on the hunt for Zaarin; he knew Niriz' approach. "Very good, sir. I'll handle it."

Niriz turned away from the viewport and went over to the tactical station. He settled on the ensign's shoulder and asked, "Any movement on the planet yet?"

"Nothing we can see," she replied.

There'd been no comm signals either. Niriz had been hoping Thrawn would be able to swoop down, grab Fel and Starflare, and call a retreat; the moment he'd seen that Marauder corvette sneak in a landing he knew things wouldn't be that easy.

He watched the tactical holo and saw a dozen missile boats and a dozen Xg-1 Starwings drop out of *Grey Wolf's* hangar. They ignored *Invidious* and cut a straight line for Grant's star destroyer. Niriz was under no illusions; it would be a master stroke of luck to best a true grand admiral in battle. The job Thrawn had given him was to hold, and he intended to do that as long as he could, as best as he was able.

Grant was sure he'd worked with less competent partners in battle before, but none sprung to mind right now. Tavora's captured star destroyer was good enough at harassing Thrawn's rear and keeping him distracted, but without a fighter screen of her own, she was forcing Grant to spread his own ships too thin.

Thrawn was no fool; he saw exactly what the other grand admiral's weakness was. Grant watched on the tactical holo as new ships dropped out of *Grey Wolf's* hangar.

"Sir, those new ships..." the tactical officer began, then trailed off in confusion.

"Well, lieutenant?"

"Sir, we're picking up two dozen ships. Half are Xg-1 Starwing fighters. The others... They looked like they're using Starwing frames but the computer can't identify them."

Grant didn't need to know more. He'd studied Thrawn's reports on his hunt for Zaarin and knew the alien was going to try and use custom-made missile boats loaded with high-yield anti-starfighter projectiles to rip apart Grant's already-thin fighter screen. With that gone, the Starwings would swoop in and break his shields open their own warheads.

Thankfully, Grant had researched these vessels, and knew what to do.

“Captain Bremel,” he called across the bridge, “Have both TIE interceptor squads form on our starboard flank. Tell them to hold position but get ready to charge the attacking ships.”

While Bremel carried out the order promptly, Grant walked over to the crew pit and bent low over the sensor control section. He called the lieutenant over and said, “I want you to begin running a reverse loop through our electronic tracking system. I want you to connect the sensor feed to our comm transmission systems and use their hardware to broadcast. Can you do that?”

The lieutenant frowned. “We’d need Comm to shut down their own systems, otherwise they might get fried by the feedback.”

“Don’t worry, they will.”

“Sir, if we do that, every sensor on on this ship will be useless. We’ll muck up the tracers on every ship nearby. The gunnery computers, the-”

“We won’t need them. Our targets are within visual range.”

“But the starfighters-”

“They can shoot with their eyes too. How fast can you do it?”

The lieutenant swallowed. “Five minutes. Maybe six.”

Grant glanced to the viewport. He couldn’t see those missile boats with his naked eyes, but they were coming. “Do it in four, lieutenant. *Hurry.*”

Grant hurried too; he went to the comm station and told them, without explanation, to perform an emergency shut-down on all systems. Then he went to tactical and relayed an order to all fighter pilots: shut off your targeting computers and prepare to shoot manually. To the interceptor pilots, he gave a simple order: Fire *after* the enemy releases payloads.

Not twenty seconds after the sensor lieutenant said he was ready to start the loop, Tactical reported that the missile boats had just launched warheads that were tracking the interceptors.

Grant snapped his fingers. The tactical crew let out a surprised yelp as their holo dissolved in a blur of static;

Grant stalked over to the front viewport, so close he pressed both hands against the cold transparisteel. He watched as the cluster missiles suddenly lost direction, their guidance systems jammed. Exhaust trails became a tangled web and the web lit up with explosions as the missiles collided.

The TIE interceptors charged in through the flame. Some hit debris and exploded themselves, but more charged through and tore the surprised missile boats to pieces. The Starwings behind them attempted to scatter but the interceptors fell on them as well. Another squadron of TIE fighters, seeing the opportunity, rushed in without waiting for orders and helped ravage the Starwings and missile boats before they could make any attack run on *Oriflamme*.

"Excellent, excellent!" Grant called. "Sensors, shut down that loop! Comm, prepare to start up again!"

The crew moved quickly and confidently. The tactical holo blazed back to life and the comms came on again. Grant watched from the fore of the bridge as Thrawn's scattered attack craft retreated to their home vessel to prepare for some other attack.

"Sir," Captain Bremel said, "We've just got a comm signal! Our team is getting ready to land on Orron III."

It was about time. The moment Tavira had revealed her little sleight of hand, Grant had ordered a transport full of his best stormtroopers to get to Orron III as fast as possible, even if it meant trudging through most of the system at sublight speed. He only hoped they weren't too late.

Grant acknowledged the news with a nod, then walked back to the crew pit. "Helm," he said, "Bring us closer to *Grey Wolf*."

The lieutenant looked up. "What about the interdicator?"

"It won't run far. The main threat right now is that star destroyer." He spun around and marched over to the comm station. "Someone get me a line to *Invidious*. Let's see if that little tart is willing to pull some weight in this fight."

A pair of scowling Nikto were waiting for Wedge and Syal at the base of the corvette's lowered landing ramp. Their captor, who'd introduced himself as Van Tyrac on the way, walked them up the ramp and gunpoint, straight into the

corvette's main cargo hold. The Nikto placed a pair of metal chairs in the middle of the half-empty chamber and tied Wedge and Syal to their seats by the wrists and legs.

Once they were bound, Tyrac looked down on them with a condescending smile and tapped the flat side of his curved vibro-knife against his palm. "Thanks to your good shooting, Rogue Leader, we've got some repairs to make before we take off. But rest assured, friend, it won't be long."

"What does Tavira want with us?" asked Wedge. Syal shot him another questioning look; she still had no idea who Leonia Tavira was, and Wedge was in no hurry to cure his sister's ignorance.

"What *wouldn't* she want you for?" Tyrac shrugged. "My guess is she'll sell you both to the highest bidder. She does love making men compete for her affection, you know." He sighed. "If only Baron Fel were here. Then we'd have a complete package. But having Wedge Antilles... Well, that's still a pleasant surprise."

Wedge clamped his jaw shut; so did Syal. Tyrac looked at them both with a curious expression and asked, "Tell me, who was in that other X-wing?"

They didn't respond. Tyrac bent close and looked Wedge in the eye. "Who was it? Another Rogue?"

Wedge put on a sneer. "What does it matter? He's dead."

Tyrac's eyes passed to Syal. A smile played on his pale lips; he stepped around to the side of her chair and crouched at her side.

"What are you doing?" she asked, voice shaking.

"I asked a question. You know the answer. I can feel it."

"You're wrong."

Tyrac extended two fingers and placed them on Syal's forehead. He closed his eyes as though concentrating and she gave a tiny gasp.

"What's happening?" Wedge asked, "Is he hurting you, Syal?"

As soon as he said his sister's name he regretted it. Tyrac's eyes opened. "Hmmm. So 'Wynssa Starflare' was a stage name. I should have seen that coming. The real question is how do *you* know her real name, Rogue Leader?"

Wedge tried to think of an answer for that; he couldn't come up with anything. Tyrac tapped Syal's forehead again and closed his eyes.

"Do you know Rogue Leader, Syal?" he hummed.

"N-N-No..." Syal stuttered. "I haven't seen him in... in..."

Tyrac hummed again. "Years. Many years... But you *have* seen him..."

"What are you, a Jedi?" Wedge hissed.

Tyrac opened his eyes again. "You know, you're the second person to ask me that today. The full answer is long and not actually interesting, so I'll just say 'no'. I do know some good tricks, though."

"Stop it," Syal whimpered, "Whatever you're doing, just *stop* it."

"You'd be smart not to fight. The last person who tried it made me fry his brain." Tyrac closed his eyes again. "Ah, I get it now..." He chuckled and shook his head. "Well, that *does* explain things. Not what I expected, but, it *does* work... Say it for me, Syal. Say your real name, the one you were born with."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Her lips trembled. Tyrac said again, "Say your name. Say it."

"Antilles," she breathed. "Syal... Antilles... *Fel*."

"And the baron, was he in that X-wing?"

"Stop it!" Wedge barked. "You'll hurt her!"

"Baron Fel is out there, isn't he? *Isn't he?*"

"Yes! Yes!" Wedge shouted, "He bailed before he went down! Just let her go!"

Tyrac pulled his fingers away. Syal slumped in her chair, eyes closed, breathing hard. Tyrac stood up and looked over his shoulder at the two Nikto. "Get the rest of your clan in the ready room," he said, "I have a very important mission for you."

The Nikto ducked down a hallway; Tyrac looked back at Syal and Wedge, smiled again, and said, "Hold on. We'll have you all together soon. A nice family reunion."

He stuck that curved knife back in his belt and followed the Nikto down the hall. For a moment it seemed like the whole room was empty. Wedge strained in his chair to look behind him and saw a pair of Gran leaning against the back wall.

Both were looking at him with bored expressions, as though the scene they'd just witnessed wasn't out of the ordinary. Maybe it really hadn't been.

Wedge bent as close to his sister as he could and said, "Syal, are you okay? Syal?"

She raised her head with effort. "What... What was he doing?"

"He had some kind of Force powers."

"I told him... About us, about Soontir..."

"He made you. You couldn't help it," Wedge said, then amended. "And I was the one who told him about Soontir. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Wedge." She sniffed and looked at him with sunken, tired eyes. "Oh, Wedge, I'm so sorry..."

"This is my fault. I should have seen him coming. I should have-"

"Wedge I should have never left-"

"I shouldn't have waited so long to-"

They both stopped and stared. Then a tired smile slanted on Syal's face and she started laughing.

"Oh, Wedge," she sniffed, "I can't believe you're here."

Somehow, Wedge couldn't believe he'd been anywhere else. He thought of everything that had happened since Syal left Corellia twenty years ago: their parents' death, his smuggler days with Booster and Mirax, his first fights with the Rebel Alliance, running the Death Star, forming Rouge Squadron, running *another* Death Star for good measure. All of it felt remarkably small as he sat here next to his sister again. Seeing Syal in the flesh, even as she was now, brought new life to all the old childhood memories which in turn made the present feel richer.

When he looked at Syal it was like he was seeing his own beginning and end, the thing that made a circle whole and encompassed everything else.

He looked at her stomach. "Not much longer, is it?"

She shook her head.

"Do you have a name?"

"Not yet. I don't even know if it's boy or girl. I was... waiting for Soontir."

"You should name it after Mom or Dad."

“Soontir already said if it’s a girl he wanted to name it for his grandmother.”

“Then if it’s a boy, name it after our father. I’d love to give flying tips to a Jagged Fel someday.”

She laughed lightly. “I’d be happy to let you... if...”

“We’re going to get out of here,” he told her. “We’re going to get Fel and we’ll run. We’ll go the New Republic.”

“Wedge, I...”

“We can do it, Syal. We’ll escape and you can meet everyone—Tycho, Hobbie, Janson, all the Rogues. And Winter and Leia and everyone. I *want* you to meet them. I want...”

He trailed off. He wanted to show her his whole life, all she’d missed out on, and even though they were trapped here he couldn’t believe it could end any other way. He’d found Syal again after coming this far; nothing could snuff out the optimism burning deep inside when he looked in his sister’s eyes.

“Oh, Wedge,” she smiled a soft, sad smile. “We’ve missed so much. I—”

There was a clatter of footsteps, and six Nikto with rifles walked across the hold for the loading ramp. Tyrac was right behind them, but instead of following he marched right to the captives.

“They’ll have the Baron here in a minute,” Tyrac said cheerily. “But first, I’m going to break up the reunion.”

“What?” Syal gasped.

“You can stay here for when they drag your husband in,” said Tyrac as he knelt behind Wedge’s chair and untied his bonds. “Rogue Leader is coming with me to the command deck.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Wedge said firmly as the binding fell from his wrists.

“Yes, you are,” said Tyrac as he waved the tip of his knife in front of Syal’s face. “Otherwise Mrs. Fel is going to look a lot less pretty.”

Wedge scowled and got up. “What do you want with me?”

“We’re going to place a little call. I want to see the surprise on lovely Leonia’s face when she sees the new prize I brought her.”

Wedge could think of nothing he wanted less. Tyrac waved the knife-blade in his face and said, "March, flyboy. I can ruin your looks just like I can ruin hers."

He looked down at Syal and gave her a single nod. Then he turned and let Tyrac march him off.

It was, frankly, the most incredible story Soontir Fel had ever heard, but as he sat inside the escort shuttle's main cabin he found no choice but to believe it.

Most of the story-telling had been done by the four men in white armor. While the fifth member of their team, Grave, kept looking for Syal and Wedge, their leader, LaRone, had explained the long circuitous route his team had taken to serving Grand Admiral Thrawn in his battle against the savage warlords of the Unknown Regions. He had to admit that many of the uncertainties and crises these rogue storm-troopers had confessed to had matched his own.

"So all of this," Fel said, "Coming in from the Unknown Regions, hunting Syal for weeks, this ruse to draw me here... Was it all about *me*? Just to get me to fly for you? I'm not sure whether to feel humbled or flattered."

"I've been watching your career from afar for quite some time," Thrawn said. "I'm not alone in that, I'm sure, but it has proven quite interesting. I believe you've shown many talents which will serve us well."

"I'm a good flier. I always have been."

"There's far more to it than that. You are a believer in law and order, Baron Fel, and you believe peace requires a strong hand to be secured. You also believe that power must be wielded responsibly for the greater good, not the satisfaction of those in power."

"You know I've been fighting for the Rebels." Fel looked down at his hands. He was surprised how quickly he'd gone back to thinking of them like that, *Rebels* instead of a new Republic. The manipulation and revelation at Etti IV had broken a trust that had been gradually cracking for months since his defection.

"I'm quite aware," Thrawn said coldly. "However, I am willing to overlook that error in judgment. You felt betrayed by Isard's actions at Brentaal, correct?"

"And other things. I didn't like seeing my men used as pawns in other people's power plays."

Thrawn nodded. "There comes an hour for every good soldier when he must judge whether the cause he's been serving is really worth his life."

Fel's jaw dropped. It was exactly what he'd told his brother-in-law just days ago. He clamped it shut, took a deep breath, and said, "I won't fly for anyone anymore, not until I'm sure my wife is out of danger."

"We won't leave this rock without her," LaRone said. "I promise."

"I've heard promises before."

Another stormtrooper, one of the two who'd come with Fel, stepped out of the shuttle's cockpit. He'd taken his helmet off and Fel couldn't conceal his surprise at the green scales and vertical pupils on the alien's face.

"Admiral," the soldier said, "We've detected another ship dropping into the atmosphere. It's coming this way."

Thrawn was immediately on his feet. "Can you identify the type, Vaantaar?"

"A DX-9 stormtrooper transport."

The other troopers jumped up too. Brightwater said, "We have to go. Now."

"Whose ship is it?" asked Fel.

"Mostly likely it was sent by Grand Admiral Grant," Thrawn said. "He's been working to claim you also, either for Isard or himself."

Someone's comlink buzzed. LaRone fished his out from his belt and held it to his mouth. "I'm here. Report."

"I'm right outside your door, boss," said a new voice, presumably Grave's. "There's something you gotta see."

There was something strange in his tone. LaRone asked, "Something like what?"

"It's like that time we fought the Ssi-ruuk on Cantoras. Come on down, you'll miss it!"

"Okay. Sure. Be right down." LaRone shut off his comm and said, "He's in trouble."

Marcross saw the look on Fel's face and explained, "We never fought the Ssi-ruuk at Cantoras."

The troopers were shoving their helmets on their faces. Thrawn's two small alien bodyguards, who'd been sitting at the back of the cabin so far, jumped to their feet. Long daggers suddenly appeared from the sleeves of their cloaks.

Quiller elbowed Fel in the shoulder and held out a DL-22 sidearm. Fel nodded and took it. LaRone hefted his E-11 and took point. Thrawn's two stormtroopers joined him in taking point. The three of them charged down the ramp; Fel wanted to run right after them but Quiller held him back.

Fel could see nothing from the base of the ramp. He heard nothing either. After a long, tense silence, LaRone called up, "Send the Baron down. He's got visitors."

Quiller tightened his grip on Fel's arm. The pilot shook it off and walked down the ramp to see four stormtroopers with their weapons on the ground and hands in the air. Six wrinkle-faced Nikto stood all around them weapon raised.

A part of Fel was surprised and disappointed that the stormtroopers had surrendered so easily. He put his hands on his head and asked. "Where did you come from? The corvette?"

"That right," one Nikto said in garbled basic. "We have wife. And brother. You come now."

He tried to console himself that Wedge and Syal were together, but he had no idea how he'd help them. One stormtrooper, the alien, said, "We have more people in that shuttle. You'll never take all of us."

"We have all need," said the Nikto, but he didn't sound so confident. He waved two of his compatriots forward. They stepped carefully toward the base of the landing ramp with their rifles pointed upward and ready to fire at whatever showed itself first.

Two brown-robes aliens fell on them, bare clawed feet slamming into their chests. Their rifles went off, firing to the sky, as long knives stabbed deep into their chests.

LaRone threw himself at Fel and knocked both to the dirt. More rifle-shots whipped by over their heads, but the fight lasted less than half a minute before everything was still.

LaRone got to his feet, he pulled Fel up. The pilot looked around in awe: all six Nikto lay dead on the ground, and over

each body stood one of those small aliens. Each one held a knife dripping with green blood.

Fel gasped, "I thought there were only *two*..."

"They're called the Noghri," Thrawn said as he came down the ramp, flanked by Brightwater and Quiller. "As you can see, they're excellent fighters."

Fel nodded stupidly. Grave said, "Sorry about that, guys. They jumped me in the grass."

"Next time we should send Brightwater for scout jobs," said Quiller.

"Fine by me," muttered Grave.

"You must move quickly," said Thrawn. "Grant's shuttle will be landing soon and the corvette's crew will realize their team is missing soon enough."

Fel stuffed his pistol under his belt, bent down over one dead Nikto, and picked up the dead being's long-barrel carbine.

"You know how to use that?" asked LaRone.

"I can do more than fly."

"Good. Come on. Like the admiral said, we've got to hurry."

Brightwater took front that time, Grave the rear. Fel joined the other stormtroopers in a single-file column as that moved through the grass. As for the Noghri, they sheathed their knives, scattered their formation, and slipped silently into the gathering dark

CHAPTER FORTY **ETTI IV**

Gouts of flame spilled into space as *Fang Zar*'s latest missile volley tore another hole through *Vengeance*'s aft section. The shields around the super star destroyer's recessed command deck shuddered but held as a trio of dreadnaughts continued their own offensive barrages.

After the initial shock of Bel Iblis' arrival, the super star destroyer had found a way to muster its defenses. It carried more snubfighters and attack craft than all of Bel Iblis' ships combined, and they'd already knocked one of his dreadnaughts into retreating. Thankfully, *Mon Maria* and *Mon Delindo* had decided to come to his aid and had launched their own fighter screens.

Despite the titanic battle raging in orbit over Etti IV, Bel Iblis knew that the real fight was taking place in the atmosphere. Grand Admiral Makati was down there, and so was Willham Burke. So, too, were Councilors Fey'lya and Organa. The latter was a devout Mon Mothma loyalist and the former was far more conniving than Bel Iblis had ever liked; still, the fight against the Empire would be worse if they were lost.

"This is a waste," he muttered to himself.

"Sir?" Did you say something?" Sena appeared swiftly at his side. He sometimes wondered if the woman was Force-sensitive, the way she read him, though more likely it could be chalked up to decades of experience.

"We need to get down to the surface," he told her. "That's where the real fight's taking place."

"We have a chance to kill this super star destroyer, sir. You said so."

He looked out the viewport at *Vengeance's* sleek black hull. The ship had taken heavy damage, enough that would have torn apart two *Imperial*-class ships, but it was simply so *big* they could waste every missile and torpedo in the assembled armada and still not destroy it.

"I was caught in the moment," Bel Iblis said. "This isn't our fight, Sena. Our fight's down there with Willham. What's the update on his ship?"

"*Emancipator's* been fighting it out with another star destroyer down there. Not Makati's, but the other one. It seems like it's finally withdrawing now."

"Those ships weren't meant for atmospheric combat. They were meant to fight in a vacuum. I'd bet Willham has fires all over his ship right now."

"Then what should we do, sir?"

Bel Iblis turn from her and marched over to the comm station. He called, "Hail *Mon Maria*! I want to speak to their captain!"

"One moment, sir," said the comm lieutenant.

Bel Iblis didn't have to wait long before the holo-image of a bulbous-eyed Mon Calamari appeared in front of him. "This is Captain Verrack."

"And this is General Garm Bel Iblis," he said, then paused to see how the captain reacted.

Verrack blinked his huge eyes, then simply asked, "What can we do to help, General?"

Bel Iblis smiled against himself; he'd been half-expecting some angry rebuttal. "I want you to pull off from *Vengeance's* bow. Come along the starboard flank to join us near the bridge."

"I can do that, General, but I won't be able to block *Vengeance* if she tries to run."

"I'm counting on that. I want to go down to the planet and help Admiral Burke but I can't do it with this thing in orbit."

Verrack nodded in understanding. "Very well. We're on our way."

The comm line shut off and Bel Iblis looked out *Fang Zar's* forward viewport. They were hovering over

Vengeance's right shoulder and looking down its bow; far ahead, he saw *Mon Maria's* organic-looking dip into view and accelerate to join them. There was, he admitted, a deadly elegance to *Mon Calamari* ships; he'd missed fight alongside them.ing

Vengeance's forward turbolaser batteries began to pound on *Mon Maria*, but Verrack's shields held firm. *Fang Zar* began to fire on the destroyer's bridge shields, and Bel Iblis felt a tension in his chest; if *Vengeance's* captain was going to panic and run, he'd do it now. If he was going to fight to the bitter end, then he wouldn't budge.

Bel Iblis hoped, prayed, that the soldiers fighting for him and *Mon Mothma* were braver than their opposite numbers.

Vengeance began to move. Bel Iblis's right fist clenched to his side as he called, "Tactical! Report!"

"That destroyer's trying to pull away, sir."

"I can see that. Where is it going?"

"Seems to be heading straight for the edge of the gravity well. No signs of changing course."

"Excellent!" Bel Iblis smacked fist into palm. "Tell all ships to keep up fire but hold position! Let it run!"

Sena appeared beside him again. "Once it's gone, do you want to go into the atmosphere, sir?"

"I do. The *Mon Cals* can fight back that one *Impstar*. *Willham* needs our help."

Adrenaline was pumping through his old body and his attention was darting everywhere at once as *Vengeance* pulled away, but he noticed the tiny, restrained smile on the woman's lips.

"What?" he asked her. "What is it?"

"I'm just glad to be doing this again sir."

He was too, he had to admit. As *Vengeance* started showing off her thruster glow, he allowed himself to wonder if maybe, just maybe, once theyd killed *Makati* and rescued the Councilors, he should follow *Burke* back to his headquarters and finally, after all that time, sit down for a talk with *Mon Mothma*.

Maybe it was time to bring his people in from the cold. Maybe it was time to finally rebuild the bridge he'd done his own part in tearing down.

But that was getting ahead of himself. They had a lot of fighting left to do.

The TIE fighter came screaming in from overhead, spitting green laser blasts that tore up the pavement of the battered debris-strew promenade and sent up geysers of charred stone with every impact.

For a second Leia's body froze as the TIE bore down on her; then, just as suddenly as it had come, it veered upward and away. For a second she had no idea why; then she saw an A-wing dart after it, spitting lasers.

"We have to hurry!" Winter said as she grabbed Leia's arm and pulled her along. They both started running down the open street, sticking close to the north building-fronts this time, where they'd be harder to spot. Avan Beruss's crashed X-wing lay a hundred meters ahead, at the end of a trail of black scorch-marks that had been plowed into the pavement.

Adrenaline warred with exhaustion as they made the last sprint. As she clambered onto a twisted S-foil and reached for the X-wing's cockpit, Leia had the stupid, giddy thought that at least now she'd have a story to impress Han with when he got back from Kashyyyk. If she got back from Etti IV.

The tang of laserfire ripped her thoughts clear and made her duck. She pressed her shoulders against the curve of a dead thrust engine as a half-dozen stormtroopers came charging from up ahead. Winter, having taken cover behind the warped S-foil, fired over its scorched edge and caught one stormtrooper in the chest; Leia was able to take out another but there were too many. The cover provided by the thrust engine wasn't enough and if she tried to dash to Winter's hiding place they'd nail her.

She heard another sound, the high-pitched retort of a hold-out pistol. She turned her head and saw a series of shots burst out of the cracked-open X-wing cockpit, taking out two more stormtroopers. Leia reared forward to start shooting again and Winter joined in; three shooters together were enough to drop all the stormtroopers in the middle of the street.

Leia clambered over to the cockpit and shoved its hatch back. Avan's face was smeared with sweat and blood but when he saw her his expression lit up.

"Leia!" he said, "I can't believe you're alive!"

"You stole my line. Can you move, Avan?"

He looked down at his legs and Leia followed his eyes. The mangled, bloodied mess of his left limb made her wince.

Winter appeared beside Leia, saying over the howl of another overhead TIE fighter, "We have to move, fast."

"I'm not sure if I can do that," Avan said apologetically.

"We didn't come this far just to leave you," Winter said. She stuck her blaster in the waistband of her tattered gown and threw her bare legs over the edge of the cockpit. "We'll pull you out and get a tourniquet on your leg. Just be ready."

"I'll do my best," Avan panted. Leia could see now he was getting woozy from blood loss, and moving his shattered leg would only increase the flow.

But as Winter said, they hadn't come all that way for nothing. She was about to reach in and take his shoulders when she heard the familiar mechanical warble of an AT-ST. All three of them froze and saw a scout walker step into the street up ahead. Its cockpit tilted forward slightly, like it was looking right at the bodies of the dead stormtroopers ahead. Then it raised its chin-mounted cannons to the broken X-wing lying helpless in the street.

Leia saw the flare of an incoming torpedo. She threw an arm around Winter's shoulder and hurled the both of them head-first into Avan's lap, just before the torp caught the AT-ST right in the face. The explosive shockwave popped her ears and washed heat over the promenade. Leia dared pick her head up just in time to see an X-wing with yellow-and-black checkerboard stripes on its nose pull over their heads.

Avan shouted something and raised a fist in the air. Leia couldn't tell what for the ringing in her ears, but it didn't matter. As they disentangled themselves, Leia's eyes met Winter's and both of them knew what to do. Together, as carefully as they could with their ears still ringing and battle raging overhead, they began to move Avan.

For so long, the crew of the warship *Emancipator* had been running up and down its corridors, frantically moving in and out of the forward command room where their warleader held court. The command room was big and broad, with two

long pits where the crew worked and windows bright with sunshine; beyond the windows were a sea of fat white clouds and, floating amidst the clouds, another great warship that had battled their own with lightning and thunder for the past hours. As it fled now the black scorch-marks on its pale hull were clearly visible; drifts of black smoke rose from fiery tears in its skin and mingled with the cloud-wisps.

Emancipator's warleader had been on his feet the entire time, waving his hands and giving orders to the crew in the pits. It was like he'd been possessed by a demon that granted boundless energy. He wore no fine robes or fetishes to distinguish him from the others, but he was clearly warleader nonetheless; the immediate deference everyone showed him was proof of that.

Still, the warleader had been on his feet since before the windows had filled with clouds. The battle they'd just engaged in, with the other floating white warship, had been taxing, and as it finally began to retreat it looked like the demon inside him promptly fled; the warleader seemed to wilt in the sunlight, all his ardor finally gone.

Akharan of Clan Bakh'tor had been waiting a long time for this moment. From his hiding place behind the metal grate in the room behind the command deck, he'd watched the warship's crews dash backed and forth, listened to the alarms and felt the shudders every time lightning from the other big ship had struck theirs. He could tell from their postures, their motions, that the battle for these beings was far from over. It had, however, come to a lull, which meant that some of them were moving off from the bridge to grab food to sustain them for when the battle began to rage again.

Akharan had been waiting in this place since the fight began amidst the stars. He'd been aboard *Emancipator* for longer than that. It felt like years since he'd left Honoghr, and every step of the journey the true New Vader had sent him on had taken him further from everything he'd known. First, he'd sneaked aboard the false New Vader's shuttle to a new planet. Then he'd watched the false New Vader die and dissolve to nothing, and then he'd stolen away on the ship of the false New Vader's killers. They'd taken him to another big ship, and from there he'd sneaked aboard on this one.

All the way, he'd been speaking with the true New Vader on the small talking device he'd been given. The New Vader had explained all the wonders he was seeing calmly and patiently, and instructed him on one task after another. These strange metal labyrinths that moved through the stars still amazed him, but he no longer felt afraid of their cold clean hallways and their groaning dirty insides.

His confidence had grown step by step as he'd carried out the New Vader's orders. He'd found dark hiding places where no one ever went, and he learned how to steal food left behind by careless crew. He'd learned how to operate the light-boards that told him where this ship was traveling amidst the stars. He'd even figured out how to copy messages on tiny pieces of metal, and had left one as requested with a crewman's belongings.

Akharan had discovered that, in a strange way, walking among the stars was exciting, even *fun*. But fun was not why he was here. Fun was not why he'd been hiding outside the command deck, patiently waiting for the chance to fulfill the New Vader's last command.

More booted feet walked past his hiding place, and again, no one looked into the low shadows beyond the metal grate to see him. He'd found himself a fortunate angle from which he could watch the command deck, and he knew the warleader had not left. He did, however, look to be talking with another warrior, a tall thin man with black hair on his head and above his lip. The warleader patted the other man on the shoulder in what looked like a sign of friendship; then he turned and began walking toward Akharan.

The young Noghri tensed. He placed one hand on the grate and readied to push. With his other, he grasped his knife. That knife had been forged for him when he was a child, and he'd carried it into every battle since, always dreaming that he'd take it with him into the stars if he ever got the chance.

The warleader was coming close now. He didn't even have guards. Akharan muttered a short, silent prayer, invoking the glory of Clan Bakh'tor. Then he shoved the grate aside and sprung.

The warleader saw him and turned, but it was too late. Akharan struck out with his knife, catching the warleader in

the throat. Blood sprayed in Akharan's face. He flipped the knife into an underhanded grip and stabbed downward, deep into the center of the man's chest to make sure he struck the killing blow. Then Akharan turned and ran. There were shouts behind him; he heard the sharp sound of light-weapons firing behind him and ducked low so their shining bolts whipped over his head.

He turned a corner and found another swarm of soldiers with light-weapons bearing toward him. He knew he could never take them all. He reached for the little metal sphere he'd stuck into the pouch at his belt. The New Vader had instructed him on how to steal it, and how to use it. It was not a noble, weapon, not the like knife he'd carried with him since childhood. There was no honor in it, nor being killed by it.

But the enemy would not take him if he used it, not even his body. For the Noghris, it was a disgrace if a fallen warrior's corpse fell into another clan's hands. With it, they could desecrate his memory. The New Vader understood that. He'd told Akharan to leave nothing behind for the enemy.

Akharan stopped in the middle of the hallway and squeezed the button on the sphere. For one moment, his mind flashed back to the sickly fields of Honoghr and the pride he'd felt the first time he'd taken up his knife. He hoped the lands of Clan Bakh'tor would be restored one day. He hoped his life, his blood, and his honor hadn't been wasted.

Then he let go of the button, and everything stopped.

The explosion in the aft vestibule rattled the entire bridge, nearly throwing Drayson to his feet as he scrambled over to Admiral Burke. Alarms wailed, lights flashed, and anti-inflammatory foam rained from ceiling dispensers. The sharp smell of the spray washed out the reek of smoke and death.

A medic had already gotten to Burke. Drayson dropped to his knees in a pool of blood as the Gotal dropped a white cloth around Burke's face and shook his horned head.

"One strike in the chest, plus one to the throat," the Gotal said. "It nearly took his neck clean through."

Drayson stared at Burke's bloodstained, featureless face-mask and tried to understand how things had suddenly gotten

so bad. Bel Iblis had appeared like a miracle and chased away a super star destroyer. After an hour-long slugfest in the sky, *Emancipator* had driven *Tenacious* into retreat. Burke had just stepped aside to grab some stims from his quarters while Ben Iblis' star destroyer came down to help with Makati.

And then everything suddenly went up-side down. Drayson stared helplessly at that white-covered face until someone touched his shoulder; *Emancipator*'s first officer. He rose on wobbly legs and raised his voice above the sound of the alarms still wailing in the explosion-battered hall behind him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We're getting a call from *Fang Zar*," the lieutenant said. "They... wanted to speak to Admiral Burke."

Drayson knew if he looked down at the corpse again he might never look up. "I'll handle it," he said.

When he arrived at the comm station he saw the rest of the bridge crew was as stunned and confused as he was. He turned on the transmission and a holographic head-shot appeared in front of him: the long white hair, mustache, and stubborn set to the lips were all trademark Garm Bel Iblis.

Thick eyebrows drew together as the old senator asked, "Drayson, isn't it?"

A Chandrilan and loyal Mon Mothma ally who'd never expected Bel Iblis to come to help. But there wasn't time for that. "Admiral Burke is dead. I'm sorry."

"Dead? But your ship—"

"An assassin. It just happened. It- some *thing*- jumped out and killed him with a knife. We tried to pursue but it blew itself up. It just happened. I'm sorry, I can't explain more."

The old Corellian's face went slack with shock. Drayson doubted his own looked any different.

"I'm sorry," Bel Iblis said finally.

"Believe me, so am I. But our councilors are still down there, and Grand Admiral Makati is dead ahead. I need to know right now. Will you still fight with us?"

Bel Iblis seemed to stare into the distance, and Drayson was afraid he was going to cut and run now that his old ally had suddenly, incredibly been struck down.

But then he said, "We'll stay with you."

“Thank you, General,” Drayson nodded. “Let’s make sure he didn’t die for nothing.”

“What’s the status of *Tenacious*?” Grand Admiral Makati asked as he and Captain Vivant hovered close to the tactical holo.

“Battered, sir. Since we’re fighting in atmosphere he’s having a hard time with onboard fires.”

“We’re going to need him. Have him form up on our starboard flank.”

As Vivant dashed away to relay the order, Makati glowered at the tactical holo. The sudden appearance of the second Rebel fleet had thrown the battle in chaos. Captain Sysco had, without so much as a word of apology, taken his super star destroyer and fled after sustaining only superficial damage. If Grand Admiral Grant had been here it would never have happened, and Makati found himself hoping that Sysco had fled to somewhere in loyal Imperial space so Isard could give him the appropriate reward for cowardice, though he doubted the man was that foolish.

But Makati couldn’t let himself think of cowards and traitors, not when that old *Venator*-class destroyer was descending into the clouds to join them. So far the Rebel destroyer had been afraid to attack *Steadfast*, lest the whole ship fall and crush their precious councilors, but now that the Rebels held the advantage in orbit, he expected them to risk an offensive. The sole Imperial warship up in space, *Implacable*, was hovering indecisively in outer orbit. Even if Captain Trigit did try and bring his ship into the atmosphere it would surely be blocked by two Mon Cal cruisers.

Thanks the explosion on the ventral sensor package- almost surely sabotage- Rebel assault shuttles were flying unimpeded beneath *Steadfast*’s hull and attempting to make landings on the estate grounds beneath. They might scoop up their councilors soon and make a run for it. If that happened, the two Rebel destroyers would surely unleash hellfire on *Steadfast* and *Tenacious*.

Makati was no longer sure if they could win this fight. He was tempted to order his dorsal gunners to turn the entire ground beneath them to glass. Not capturing those councilors

alive would draw Isard's wrath, to say nothing of losing *Vengeance* so soon after gaining it, but if he didn't, he might not live to fight another day.

It was an impossible dilemma. The two rebel star destroyers had joined in the clouds and angled themselves to face *Tenacious* and *Steadfast*, like they were like bull nerfs staring down a Tanaab matador before the charge.

Even if they stayed to pound the Lanchenzoor estate to lifeless rubble, they might not make it out.

"Captain!" Makati called, and a second later Vivant was at his side. "Tell the dorsal gunner crew to prepare a manual firing solution."

"On what, sir?"

"Everything. We won't leave the Rebels anything to recover."

Vivant frowned. "But... sir... We have troops down there."

In his desperation Makati had almost forgotten about them. He'd been willing to casually burn hundreds of his own men and cursed himself for it. "Tell them to begin withdrawal. Keep the TIEs flying and make sure the Rebel shuttles don't get in the air. When the bulk of our troops are out, I'll give the order and we'll glass the surface."

Vivant didn't have to tell him how unhappy Isard would be to lose the chance to capture such prized enemies, and Makati didn't have to tell him that Isard would be even more angry if they escaped entirely.

"One more thing," Makati called as Vivant turned to go. "Give Shadow Squadron the go-ahead to launch. Tell them to stay cloaked the moment they leave the hangar."

Vivant swallowed. "Are you certain, sir?"

He looked out the viewport at those two Rebel destroyers. He was surprised they hadn't charged already. "They may be the only thing that keeps us alive, Captain. I'll give them their orders once they're in the air. Launch them *now*."

Jekk Karr stared at the faceless mask of the stormtrooper in front of him. Firmly the man repeated, "This is a restricted area. I can't let you pass."

His mind flashed back twenty years to when he'd been a kid on Generis. He'd been out fishing by the river and come

back to see a whole column of stormtroopers had raided his village, saying they were rooting out Rebel insurgents. He'd run back to his home and found a stormie in that same white mask blocking his way, and the stormie had told him the same thing: "I can't let you pass."

His father was already dead inside, shot for resisting the search and seizure of a household that hadn't done anything wrong; Karr's father had refused to help the insurgents because he didn't want to bring the Empire down on his family. Not that it had mattered in the end.

Karr tilted his own helmet slightly; there was one more stormie over the first one's shoulder, and beyond that was the last doorway between them and the command tower's climate control module.

"Turn around now," the first stormie said. "This is direct from the grand admiral. Nobody's allowed near critical systems after the sabotage."

Karr looked over his own shoulder and saw Ekrhine still behind him. The Imps had despoiled the Em'liy's entire homeworld and scattered his people across the galaxy. For the both of them, that faceless white stormtrooper helmet had always meant the same thing: oppression and death.

The second stormie said, "Soldier, I want to see your identification."

"My identification?" Ekrhine grunted through his helmet.

"That's right. What business do you even *think* you have here?"

"You want my identification? Fine, you can have it." Ekrhine reached for his helmet. Karr wanted to shout at him, tell him this was a stupid idea-

-But he didn't really have a better one.

Ekrhine tore off his helmet, exposing his flat dark-blue alien face. It stunned both stormies for a full second, which was all Karr needed to whip up his rifle and pump laser-blasts into both their chests.

"You've really done it now," Karr said as Ekrhine threw his helmet away and rushed for the door.

"It got the job done, didn't it?" the Em'liy said as he punched in the passcode Dey'rylan had promised would work.

"Except we're gonna get a whole squad coming our way soon," Karr reminded him.

"Picky, picky..." Ekrhine muttered. The doorway slid open and both of them rushed inside.

Karr plucked his comlink from his mouth as he surveyed the circular chamber. "Boss, you there? Still camping?"

"Still in Makati's cabin," the Bothan confirmed. "Where are you?"

"In the atmo room. There's a big pylon dealie in the middle with lots of pipes. I'm guessing that what we need to blow up."

"I'm guessing you're right. Did you get in okay?"

"Um, so, the thing about that..." Karr looked back at Ekrhine. "Hey! You locked that door?"

"Yeah, but I don't know how long it'll hold," the Em'liy said as he started taking out his charges and placing them around the central pylon.

"We're in," he told Dey'rylan. "That's all that matters."

"Jekk, do you have a way out?"

Karr looked around the chamber, hoping there was an auxiliary hatch or a secondary exit. He saw nothing except dense, tangled machinery oppressing him on all sides.

"Just get ready for a boom, boss," he said. "I bet you'll feel it."

"Jekk--"

"Do you job, boss. We'll do ours."

Karr shut off the comlink, took one deep breath, and began placing his own charges. He didn't get very far before he heard fists pounding on the other side of the door.

"That was fast," Ekrhine said.

"Tends to happen when you shoot a couple stormies. All his buddies want in on the fun."

"Think we've laid enough charges for a big boom?"

Karr stepped back and looked over their handiwork. "Don't think we have to worry about that."

There was a flash of light and Karr thought that was it; then smoke poured into the chamber and red laser-blasts tore through the smoke. Karr and Ekrhine rushed around the central pylon, putting it between them and the door full of stormtroopers. They fired shots back around the pylon's

curved edge but it became clear very quickly that they couldn't hold off the stormies for long.

"Jekk!" Ekrhine called, "You have the trigger?"

Karr reached into his pocket and drew it out: a little cylinder no bigger than his comlink. The only difference was the red button under his thumb.

Karr felt fear surge inside him, the old fear he'd known since Generis. Then he remembered the white mask that had always blocked his path, and the anger came too.

"Jekk! Do it!"

His hand was shaking. He peeked around the curve of the pylon toward the door. The first stormtroopers were daring to break through the haze. He saw the first white mask and all the childhood anger came on strong, the way it always had.

Anger defeated fear. He thumbed the trigger.

The entire command deck shuddered so hard Makati was nearly thrown off his feet. It made no sense; the enemy destroyers were still sitting inexplicably in the distance and hadn't charged.

Then someone reported, "Sir, there's been a shipboard explosion! It's the atmosphere center for the control tower!"

"Fire control teams are shutting down the blaze," someone else added.

"More sabotage," Vivant snarled.

"Begin recirculating air from the main body of the ship," Makati ordered. "And send down more fire teams."

As the crew rushed to comply, Vivant lowered his voice and said, "It'll take time for the atmo from the rest of the ship to compensate."

Makati knew what they meant. Very soon, the entire bridge would start getting dangerously lightheaded, and depending on the damage done they might even start suffering from serious carbon dioxide poisoning. The oxygen from the rest of the ship would even things out in time, but time wasn't on their side; those two Rebel star destroyers would be charging any minute. In one swift stroke, the saboteurs had crippled *Steadfast* from within.

"We will not abandon the bridge," Makati said. "Call emergency crews. Get some oxygen tanks up here."

Vivant nodded. "And what about the ground bombardment?"

In the frenzy Makati had almost forgotten. Once he gave the order, the entire main goal of the mission, the capture of the Rebel leaders, would be scrubbed.

"Have our troops withdrawn?"

"Partially, sir."

"I'll let them have five more minutes. Then I'll give the order."

Karr was dead. So was Ekrhine. So were Sheer and Koth Melan and-

"Get ready to move," Kasck said.

Dey'rylan jumped at the sound of his slurred voice. He glanced sidelong at the russet-furred Bothan, who was checking the power pack on his blaster rifle one more time. Both of them had portable oxygen tanks hooked to their belts and breathing tubes stretching up to their mouths. As expected, they hadn't been able to find anything for Bothans, so in the end they'd just taken the oxygen tubes and stuck them at the corners of their snouts, holding them in place with half-clamped jaws. It was awkward, but they'd still be in better shape than the Imps on the bridge.

"We stay low and shoot high," Kasck reminded him. "In his white suit he'll be hard to miss. My guess is that they'll have drawn off a lot of personel to fight the fire down below. That should help. That and the hypoxia."

"What if he's not on the bridge?"

"Then we die for nothing."

He said it so matter-of-fact. His voice was steady, but his fur prickled in fear.

Dey'rylan looked away. He checked his weapon and made sure it was charged, one more time. Then he glanced at the grand admiral's old protocol droid. It was standing right where they'd left it, though its arms were at its sides now and its laser cannon had been retracted into its arms. It looked like the old antique machine everyone probably assumed it was. Its glowing photoreceptors stared blankly ahead; Dey'rylan had already risked passing in front of it and gotten no reaction. His slicing job on the droid's cortex had done

that much right, at least. He hoped the rest had worked too, though he'd never get to test it.

He wondered what the story behind that droid was. Makati's quarters didn't leave much hint to the personality of the man they were about to kill, though the droid and the old two-dimension pictures on the wall hinted at some private sentimentality. Dey'rylan had examined those while they'd waited for Karr and Ekrhine. They showed landscapes, buildings, people, but they were useless without context. Dey'rylan would never know anything about the man Makati was; he hadn't even wanted to until this moment, when all three of them were about to die.

Enough.

He cradled his rifle in both hands and asked, "Think they're gasping for air by now?"

"Or at least getting slow and fuzzy, yeah."

Dey'rylan crept up to the door and rested one paw on the control panel.

When he didn't press the button, Kasck said, "There's no point in waiting, not when you know where you're going to end up."

It could have been the story of his life; of all their lives, ever since they chose to fight the kind of fight they did.

"Okay," Dey'rylan punched the button. "Let's go."

The emergency crew had just arrived: three men laden down with ten oxygen masks each. It wasn't enough for even a third of the bridge crew, but before taking his own, Makati directed the handout of the breathing masks to Captain Vivant, the section lieutenants, and ensigns with key roles like helm and gunnery control. The hypoxia was already taking hold; Makati felt the world swim around him, almost like he'd gone drunk.

The one good thing was that those Rebel star destroyers *still* hadn't moved. He had no idea what the problem was there.

The crews were just about done handing out breathing masks when Vivant tapped him on the shoulder and held out a mask.

"Please, sir," he said. "Just take it."

Just as Makati reached for it, a commotion erupted from the entrance to the bridge. Two figures sprinted through the open blast doors, bodies bent low. Makati spotted the laser rifles in their hands right before they fired. Vivant pushed Makati aside; dizzy from oxygen loss, Makati tumbled to the deck and saw Vivant, above him, take a shot to the shoulder and spin.

Makati slammed into the deck. One of the attackers- a Bothan with rust-colored fur and an oxygen tube dangling from its snout, ran straight up the center aisle between the crew pits. It was darting toward Makati but didn't get its shot off fast enough; one of the bridge's scant remaining guards finally popped off a laser, catching the Bothan in the side of the head. It pitched to the right and tumbled into the crew pit below.

There was still another Bothan, one with black fur, but Makati couldn't see it. He flailed his arms helplessly, too weak and disoriented to even stand, and through his dazed panic he knew how pathetic it would be, how absolutely *humiliating*, to die on his back unable to rise, flailing his limbs like a stupid infant.

Then the last Bothan appeared over him. The black-furred face gazed down at his; the alien's small dark eyes were impenetrable as it raised its rifle to fire.

Then a volley of laser blasts cut in from over Makati's head and took the Bothan in the chest. It dropped the gun and fell on its back. Before Makati knew what was happening, someone had grabbed him under the shoulders and was hoisting him to his knees.

Someone shoved a breathing mask on his face; the grand admiral drew in deep drags of sweet oxygen. The ensign beside him said, "Sir, are you all right? Sir?"

"I'm fine," Makati wheezed. He clutched the breathing mask to his face and rose on trembling legs. He looked across the bridge and counted eight officers on the deck, dead or wounded, plus Captain Vivant, who winced and growled as he clutched his scorched shoulder even as he stayed on his feet.

Makati staggered over to the black-furred Bothan. His eyes gazed up at Makati, just as Makati's had gazed up at him a

moment ago. The Bothan opened his snout and tried to say something as his scorched chest strained to breath.

Makati bent a little lower and heard the Bothan rasp, "Now... I'll never know... if it worked..."

Then the Bothan gave a death-rattle, and his head rolled to one side. For a second Makati lost balance and had to brace himself against the ensign.

Then he heard a lieutenant say, "Admiral, it's the Rebel star destroyers. They're coming this way."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE ORRON III

All things considered, Leonia Tavira wished she'd gotten a chance to break in her star destroyer before being thrown into a major space battle. The simple fact was that she'd never even been aboard one of these ships before and never even seen a naval battle with her own eyes; like the rest of her crew, her experience had been limited to pirate raids on civilian haulers and occasionally running escapes from CSA picket ships.

This was far outside any of their purview, which was why she reluctantly followed Grand Admiral Grant's instructions to take her ship in close to *Grey Wolf*. She saw his stratagem clearly enough; he was giving up on fighting the interdicator and attempting to box in the star destroyer between their two ships.

It was working. The ship had slowed its acceleration toward Orron II as *Invidious* settled behind it and *Oriflamme* swung its broadside to face *Grey Wolf*'s nose. The destroyer was trying to tip its bow downward and pass under Grant's ship, which in turn gave Tavira an excellent opportunity to pound its aft shields and maybe blow some of its engines. That wouldn't be enough to kill it, of course; she was still hoping Grant could pull some miracle maneuver like grand admirals were supposed to and end this fight.

Since so many of the systems were being operated by Billibango's computer routines the battle, though full of light and fire, felt strangely *boring*. Tavira still fully intended to leave Grant and *Grey Wolf* both and flee the system as soon

as she got word from Tyrac, and when the nervous Imperial comm officer announced an incoming transmission her heart nearly skipped a beat.

She rushed over to find the scarred man's holographic face beaming up at her. She asked, "What happened, Van? Do you have the package?"

"I've got that and more," Tyrac chuckled. He reached out and pulled another man into view by a handful of brown hair. The man winced in pain and flinched when Tyrac waved the tip of his knife in his face.

"How's the transmission, Captain?" Tyrac asked. "Are you getting this?"

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Is that Wedge Antilles?"

"Rogue Leader in the flesh. We have Starflare too."

It was too good to be true. Tavira laughed in disbelief. "Van, you have outdone yourself."

"And there's more. Baron Fel himself is on this planet. He came with Antilles. I sent a team to retrieve him. They should be back soon."

Tavira's head swam. She had no idea what she'd do with all three of those prizes. She could sell Fel and Starflare to the highest bidder, but as for Antilles, she rather wanted to keep him for herself. She toyed with telling him about Tycho Celchu but decided against it; she's much rather tell him in person, after the battle, when she could savor the pain it caused him.

After all, there was no point in taking revenge if you didn't do it right.

"Tell me when you take off, Van."

"I will. Just sit tight a little longer, Captain. We're on our way."

Dagon Niriz knew he was no Grand Admiral Thrawn. He'd learned so much from the man over the past four years, but he was still no tactical genius. He was a soldier though, a loyal one, and that would have to do.

That trick Grant had used to jam the missile boats' targeting systems had worked all too well; all but two of the craft had been destroyed by Grant's interceptors and the

number of Starwings had been cut in half. Now *Oriflamme* and the second, sluggish star destroyer were trying to box him in. Grant probably figured that if he killed *Grey Wolf*, *Corvus* would drop her interdiction field and flee. He was probably right. Thrawn had told Niriz to protect *Grey Wolf* at all costs, to value it even about the grand admiral's life.

Of course, he'd told Niriz the same thing at Ruusan.

Even if he wanted to, Niriz had no place to run. *Grey Wolf* dipped its nose low in the hope of cutting beneath *Oriflamme*, but they'd still take heavy fire from Grant's ventral turbo-lasers while simultaneously getting torn up from the rear by *Invidious*.

Thrawn would have come up with some brilliant way to get around this, but Niriz was not Thrawn. Still, he did the best he could to hold against his enemies.

He ordered the remaining Starwings to regroup with a squadron of TIE Bombers, plus a squad of interceptors to provide fighter cover. He wasn't going to try and attack Grant head-on again, but *Invidious* looked a lot more vulnerable. He hoped to catch its captain by surprise.

Niriz stood at the tactical station, watching the holo as it showed the attack craft running close along the *Grey Wolf*'s underside. The destroyer's bulk, combined with the glare and heat-signature of its engines, would hopefully shield the fighters from *Invidious*' scanners.

He felt the ensign seated in front of him tense as the starfighters cut out from *Grey Wolf*'s aft. The bombers fired first, sending a wave of missiles that impacted against *Invidious*' bow shields. The Starwings fired right after; their missiles punched through the hole the bombers had made and impacted, tearing a black gash in *Invidious*' nose that would hopefully kill some of their main forward targeting arrays.

Invidious still hadn't launched any fighters, but the TIE fighter screen it had borrowed from *Grey Wolf* was spread too thin to respond in time. *Grey Wolf*'s interceptors provided flawless covering fire as the TIE bombers and Starwings made another attack run, this time on the heavily-shielded generator bulge behind the hangar mouth. They repeated the same process: bombers to weaken the shields,

then Starwings to punch through. This time the shields held, but *Invidious*' defensive screen was in such disarray the bombers and Starwings were able to turn around and make one more pass. This one was more successful; breaking through the shields and cracking open the armored dome.

More enemy fighters were on their way, so Niriz gave the recall order. The Starwings and bombers headed back to *Grey Wolf*'s protective shadow as the destroyer's nose dipped far enough below *Oriflamme* to dive.

"Talk to me, Billibango!" Tavira snapped. That last attack had just erased her previous ebullience.

In her earpiece, the Xexto said, "The reactor's still running but it looks like there's a danger of overload. We're lowering power output now."

"What does that do the engines?"

"We're going to have to cut speed by thirty percent, at least."

"What about shields?"

"I'm not sure if we can fix those; the hit on the generator blew a lot of power relays. Make sure those fighters don't leave us."

"What about hyperdrive? Can we run if we have to?"

"I think so."

"Don't *think* so. Make sure! Get ready to run to lightspeed on my order!

"Yes, Captain."

She tapped off her earpiece and looked out the forward viewport. The blue-white glow of *Grey Wolf*'s ion engines was so great and so close the captive deck crew squinted or looked away. The big destroyer was cutting downward and could try to slip beneath *Oriflamme* at a perpendicular angle.

Tavira couldn't do much more in this fight, but frankly she didn't want to either. If Tyrac could slip away with her three prizes while the other two destroyers brawled it out, so much the better. And if Grant really wanted to best *Grey Wolf* by himself, he was welcome to the fight.

When she first heard the clatter of footsteps at the base of the landing ramp, Syal's insides twisted in a mix of dread

and anticipation. After so much time and so much distance she was finally going to see her husband again; she'd wanted it so badly, but never wanted it like this.

The two Gran who'd been watching her while Tyrac hauled her brother up to the command deck heard the noise too and went down the ramp to meet the retrieval team. No sooner had they disappeared from view did Syal hear a sudden burst of laser-blasts.

Her body tensed in its chair. She saw two white-armored stormtroopers charge up the ramp, rifles ready, and felt relief rush through her.

Then six more came up behind them and she knew something was wrong. The front two troopers kept their weapons up as they ran across the deck to her position; the others moved to cover all other entrances to the storage room.

A voice she'd never heard before, gruff and angry, said, "Do you think it's her?"

"The admiral said nothing about her being pregnant."

"Who are you?" Syal asked, voice shaky, but they both ignored her.

"Tavira thought she was worth taking prisoner," the first trooper said. "Cut her free and let's go."

As the second trooper ducked behind her to cut through her bonds, she asked, "Who are you? Who do you work for? Where's LaRone?"

The trooper ignored her question again. "On your feet, lady, now."

She rose on shaky legs and cupped her stomach. "I can't move fast."

"You'll move fast enough," the second one said as he grabbed her arm in a painful grip.

Before she could cry out, laserfire resounded from somewhere else in the ship. The first stormtrooper grabbed her other arm and together they started dragging her toward the landing ramp.

"Wait!" she cried, "Stop!"

"Shut up and *move*, woman," the first one said and whipped his pistol across the top of her head. Pain blossomed at the crest of her skull as the troopers pulled her

along. Her legs kicked in vain as they dragged her down the ramp and into the dying twilight.

"They're falling back!" the burly Yuzzem snarled as he peeked through the threshold to the cargo bay.

"Do they have the package, Wukh?" asked Tyrac.

"They took her." The Yuzzem darted back into the hallway. "We have to go after them."

Tyrac looked back to the other end of the hall, where a pair of blue-skinned Etti were holding Wedge by either shoulder. Still looking at Wedge, he told the Yuzzem, "You stay here, Wukh, but keep the engines ready in case we need to take off. I'll lead the sortie."

"Good. You can track 'em in the dark," Wukh grunted. "What about the *other* package?"

Tyrac gave Wedge a considering look. They both knew it would be safer for him to keep Wedge secure on the ship.

"Let me go, please," Wedge said. He'd do anything to get off the corvette. "She's my sister! I can talk to her, convince her!"

"Of what?" Tyrac snorted. "You'll need to convince Grant's stormies."

"I can talk to *Fel*, he's my pilot. Your retrieval team hasn't come back. You know they won't now. Fel might still be running free. I can help you with him." Tyrac's pale lips twisted into a frown. Wedge pressed, "What do you think I'll do? Bind my hands, keep guards on me. I can't run, I've got no place *to* run! Just let me come!"

"All right," Tyrac grunted. He took out his long knife and waved it in Wedge's direction. "Just keep in mind, flyboy, you're the bonus prize. Tavira won't shed too many tears if I kill you before she can."

"I'll keep that in mind," Wedge said, and the two Etti shoved him forward.

They'd left Marcoss back at the shuttle to guard the grand admiral, but otherwise this was a whole-team mission. Brightwater and the two Troukree had gone ahead to scout while LaRone led Grave, Quiller, and Fel through the bush. The Noghri had scattered to parts uncertain, but there wasn't

much doubt the alien commandos could take care of themselves. This part of Orron III was falling deeper and deeper into night, and while LaRone and his men had helmets to take care of that, Fel had nothing but his own eyes.

"You sure you'll be okay like that?" LaRone asked him.

"I'll be fine," the pilot said as he held his carbine close. LaRone wasn't really sure what to make of the man, but it was clear he was willing to do anything to get his wife back safe. That was admirable, but there was probably a line between being brave and reckless.

Of course, if there really was one, LaRone had crossed it back and forth too many times to count.

Brightwater's voice rang in his ear, saying, "Boss, something just happened at the corvette! A bunch of storm-troopers just ran in and out! They got the package!"

"You mean Syal?"

"Looks like they're taking her back to the DX-9. Looks like... north-north west of the corvette."

"So straight north of our position. Thanks. We're on our way." LaRone turned his external helmet speakers on and said, "Okay, cut due north, fast as you can! Let's go!"

As they ran through the high grass, Fel had to throw up both arms to keep the stalks from slapping his face red. Looking back they should have stuck him in Marcross's armor, but it was too late for that.

"What's going on?" Fel asked as they ran. "Where's my wife?"

"Grant's boys have her. We'll cut them off at the transport."

Fel didn't need an encouragement to run faster. He was way past the wobbly legs he'd had when they first found him buried under his parachute. LaRone switched his helmet visor to IR and spotted the heat signature of the boxy assault transport dead ahead. Four hot figures were standing on the south-facing side, which was probably where the open boarding hatch was. Behind it he saw what looked like three humanoid forms on their knees, possibly hiding in the grass.

LaRone switched his helmet comm and said, "That you low on the perimeter, Korlo?"

"We're holding to the north of the ship. The retrieval team will be back in a minute. Where are you?"

“Coming up from the south. We’ll catch ‘em in a pincer. You seen the Noghri?”

“No, I don’t know where they went.”

“Then we’ll do it ourselves.”

LaRone held up a hand, signaling his troops to stop. He didn’t want to risk speaking aloud so close to the enemy troops and once again he really wished they’d put Fel in Marcross’s suit, or at least given him a helmet so he could hear and talk and see like the rest of them.

LaRone pointed at Fel, then his own chest. The pilot understood that. Then LaRone waved Quiller to head east and Grave to go west. He hoped they’d be able to pull off a full encirclement of the transport without being spotted. The fact that nobody had tried shooting at them yet probably meant Grant’s troopers were using the night-vision scope on their helmets instead of infra-red; a stupid mistake LaRone was ready to make them pay for.

It occurred to him for a moment that these stormtroopers had probably been trained just like LaRone and the rest of his men; they might have been happy in their work or they might not, but in the end, it had really been once chance encounter with a trigger-happy ISB agent that had tipped his squad’s fortunes one way, Grant’s squad another.

He shoved those feelings down. It was a lot easier fighting giant soul-sucking lizards than other Imperials but fighting was what all of them had chosen to do, one way or another.

They hit their knees less than a minute before Grant’s retrieval squad came back to the transport. Fel was probably having a hard time seeing through the clustered grass-stalks but LaRone’s IR scope was doing just fine; he could even make out Syal by the reluctant shuffle of her feet and the red-white swell at her stomach.

There was no time to waste. He said, “Quiller, do it now!”

Quiller’s shot took them by surprise; he dropped the stormtrooper holding Syal’s right shoulder and shifted his aim downward to spray more shots at the base of the entry hatch to keep them from dashing to safety inside.

“Grave!” he called, and more shots came from the opposite direction. The other trooper grabbing Syal was smart; he wrapped one forearm around her neck and pinned her to his

chest as a body-shield; then he slammed his back against the transport's armored bulkhead and began spraying one-handed fire into the grass with his blaster.

Fel darted forward without LaRone telling him to. Brightwater and the two Troukree charged in from the other side; they came around the cockpit pod with guns blazing and dropped two more of Grant's troopers, but they stopped immediately when they saw Syal, now barricaded behind a wall of four more stormtroopers while the original kept her pinned to his chest.

Fel emerged from the grass and LaRone was right behind him. He switched his helmet to normal vision and saw the service lights above the transport's open hatch shining bright on Fel's face. The light spilled onto Syal and the stormtroopers too, and LaRone could see their eyes lock over the bobbing white helmets of Syal's restless captors.

They didn't say a word; they just stared at each other. Grave and Quiller crawled out of the grass too. LaRone's men formed a circle around Syal and Grant's five remaining troops.

Everyone froze in place, and nobody said a word.

Wedge trudged through the dark as best he could. The Etti that were grabbing him must have had better night-vision, because they didn't seem to have a problem running through a dense field at with only stars for light.

Still, Wedge could make out Van Tyrac's black-haired head bobbing at the column. He also saw Tyrac throw up a hand, signaling his motley mercenary band to stop. The Etti locked Wedge's arms tight, holding him in place. His heart quickened at the sound of laserfire not far ahead. It could have been Syal, it could have been Fel; he had no idea and that was the worst part of all.

Then he heard a garbled scream, and the being in front of him fell. Shadows darted out from the grass; Wedge saw the flash of knives and the red flare of blaster-fire. He wrested himself free from the shocked Etti and threw himself headlong into the grass. He heard the sound of a body tearing through the stalks just a meter away, followed by a strangled shout from one of the Etti.

Holding his bound hands against his chest, Wedge pressed himself to the ground and tried to see what was going on. Those killers, whoever they were, had struck fast and silently, totally without warning. A series of laser-blasts flared in the night and he saw, through the grass-stalks, Van Tyrac's snarling face lit up. Then a shadow fell as though from the sky, landing right on his chest. The man stumbled back but stayed upright, firing his blaster again, seemingly right into the chest of his small humanoid attacker. The blast gave the creature pause for only a second; then it's knife flashed down, spearing through Tyrac's chest and coming out the other end. The man fell back without a sound; Wedge thought he saw the knife flash a few more times into Tyrac's sternum before his killer scampered off.

It was over as quickly as it had started. Wedge lay panting, chin in the dirt, waiting for the silent invisible assassins to come kill him too.

Nothing came. He crept forward toward the bodies, halting every few feet to listen for any sign of the alien killers. Nothing. He crawled over to Tyrac's body; his dark eyes stared lifelessly up at the stars and splashes of blood covered his pale face.

Wedge grabbed the man's knife, still at his belt. He gripped the pommel awkwardly in his hands and used it to cut his wrist-bonds free. He fumbled around and picked up Tyrac's rifle next, though if those killers were still out there he knew it wouldn't do any good.

Then he heard the sound of a warming engine. It was coming from the corvette; maybe that Yuzzem captain knew his boss was dead and was making a break for it.

The thought gave Wedge hope. The sound of blasterfire resuming ahead killed it. As he surged to his feet and ran toward the sound of combat, another engine-roar pierced the night. This one sounded like a mid-sized craft, already airborne.

It was a stalemate that could last forever, but they didn't have that long. The sound of massive thrust engines warming up cut over the field. That was a sure sign that Marauder corvette was getting ready to fly again. LaRone called up

Marcross on his helmet comm and said, "You there, Saberan?"

"I'm in the shuttle with the admiral."

"Think you can fly it?"

"I'm no Quiller."

"Seriously. Can you get it over here? We're gonna need a fast evac."

"Okay. I think I can get you that far."

"Have the ramp out and get ready to run."

"What's your status?"

LaRone hesitated, then said, "I'll get right back on that."

He switched his helmet to its external speaker and called, "I want to talk!"

Fel looked away from his wife, finally. He looked at LaRone like he was crazy.

Brightwater apparently thought so too. Over the helmet comm he said, "What are you *doing*, boss?"

LaRone hooked his rifle to his belt. Slowly, with all eyes on him, he reached up and took off his stormtrooper helmet.

That seemed to shock the ones holding Syal. Their leader, the one using Syal as a body shield, called, "What do you want, soldier?"

"The same thing you do," LaRone took a step forward. "I want to do my job, serve the Empire, and get off this rock."

"Who's your commanding officer?"

"Grand Admiral Thrawn," he said. He could hear the Marauder warming up but not the grand admiral's shuttle, not yet.

"Never heard of him," the trooper scoffed. "We were told to get this woman and that's what we're gonna do."

"You're not going anywhere," Brightwater said as he stepped up to LaRone's right, blaster still raised.

"He's right. You can't get out of this," said Fel. He took LaRone's left and let his rifle fall to his side. "Do you know who it is you're after?"

"Grant told us to get this woman. We've got her. That's *it*."

"Grant doesn't want her." Fel spread arms. "He wants *me*."

The troopers stared for a moment; maybe some of them really did recognize Fel. The one holding Syal asked, "Who are you, soldier?"

"I think you know."

"You're Baron Fel, aren't you? The defector?"

"Take me to Grant and Isard. Just let her go."

Syal opened her mouth to cry out but the stormtrooper choked her with his forearm. His faceless mask stared at Fel and stared back, just as resolute.

Then the trooper swung his rifle two inches to the side and fired.

LaRone moved on instinct. He threw himself left, knocking Fel away. Pain exploded in his chest, pain like he'd never felt before. He didn't even feel it when it hit the ground.

So much happened at once.

The trooper holding Syal swung his rifle and fired. LaRone threw himself against Fel, knocking the pilot off his feet. The rifle-shot caught him square in the chest and knocked him to the ground. The stormtroopers standing closest to the gunman reached up, grabbed the hot rifle-barrel, and wrestled it from the other trooper's hand. His grip loosened and Syal tore herself free. Noghri appeared from the shadows, knives flashing, and surrounded Grant's soldiers. None of them tried to fire and none of them tried to stop Syal as she stumbled forward.

Quiller caught her before she could fall; Brightwater dropped to his knees over LaRone and shouted the other man's name. Grave charged into the crowd of Grant's troopers, grabbed the gunman by the neck, and threw him to the ground. He pulled out his side arm and emptied three shots into the man's chest, wailing through his helmet.

All of it happened before Fel could scramble to his feet. He stared down at Brightwater, who was cradling LaRone's head in his lap. Then he looked up and saw his wife standing before him.

He couldn't think of anything to say.

That was when Thrawn's shuttle swung down over them. Its repulsors kicked air in their faces as it lowered itself right behind the DX-9. The ramp was already down. The alien stormtroopers and two Noghri scrambled up first; they clung to the landing ramp struts and waved clawed hands down at the others, beckoning more to come.

Syal stared in shock at Thrawn's alien commandos. The whine of the Marauder corvette's engines had become a roar; it would take off at any moment. Fel put a hand on his wife's shoulder and spoke his first words to her in over half a year. He said: "Go."

Quiller took her other shoulder and helped her toward onto the hovering landing ramp. Two more Noghri appeared and gave them the final boost as the shuttle swayed unsteadily on its repulsorlifts.

Fel looked down at LaRone. His eyes stared lifelessly at the stars; Brightwater was crouched low, breathing hard, like he hadn't even noticed the shuttle that had come for them.

Fel shook him, "We have to go."

"I'm not leaving the boss." Brightwater's voice cracked.

"We'll take him together," Fel said. It was the least he could do. It would never be enough.

One of Grant's troopers, maybe the one who'd disarmed LaRone's killer, had taken off his helmet. He couldn't have been more than twenty and his face, burnished and smooth in the shuttle's floodlights, squinted up at Grave.

"The admiral will kill us if we fail!" he sounded like he was about to cry. "We can't go back to him like this!"

"Then don't," the other trooper grunted.

"But where will we go?"

Grave considered a moment before saying, "You've got your ship and your men. If they're good men, you can go any place you damn well want to."

Then Grave turned and hurried for the shuttle. He helped Fel and Brightwater lift LaRone's body and carry him up the landing bay. Another Noghri helped them pull him into the cargo hold.

Quiller had already scrambled up to the cockpit, and he began to reel in the landing ramp. As it started to rise, one more Noghri lurched up to grab its landing strut. Its cloak had flown off in the wind and Fel could see the scorch-marks of a blaster shot scarring its side.

Fel reached down. The alien took his hand. Grave grabbed him by the shoulders and together they hauled the Noghri, small but heavy, onto the deck. The Noghri collapsed, and its comrades rushed to its side.

"Is he all right?" asked another Noghri. "Will he live?"

Behind them, Thrawn's voice said, "This ship has medical supplies. We can see to his wound."

The grand admiral was standing, one hand hanging off the grip rail that ran beneath the ceiling. He looked down at the wounded Noghri and asked, "How was he injured?"

"He attacked the leader of the enemy line himself," a third Noghri said. "He was wounded but kept fighting until his foe was dead."

"A brave warrior, then." Thrawn said thoughtfully. "What is your name?"

The alien looked up at the grand admiral. His face was smoother than the others'.

Wincing against the pain, the Noghri said. "I am Rukh of Clan Baikh'vair."

"You've done well today, Rukh. I'll remember that."

Rukh's young face lit up like he'd received a blessing from his god. Fel could only imagine what kind of loyalty bound these Noghri creatures to Thrawn.

The shuttle lurched as Quiller started the thrust engines and plunged them skyward. Fel looked around the deck for Syal. He spotted her, curled against the back wall. Their eyes met over LaRone's body. The grand admiral was still on his feet, even as the shuttle began its rocking ascent, staring down at the dead soldier with inscrutable alien eyes.

Octavian Grant had known all his life that in the end you could only depend on yourself; on your own competence and wit and determination. That was doubly true if your allies were like Leonia Tavira, self-satisfied schemers more corrupt and conniving than actually capable. From some reason, those were the kind Grant always found himself with.

That was why, as *Invidious* fell back and *Grey Wolf* dipped beneath *Oriflamme*, he didn't panic. Thrawn's destroyer began firing straight upward with its dorsal turbolasers, raking energy across *Oriflamme's* reinforced ventral shields. As he watched the tactical holo, Grant noticed the remaining Starwings and TIE bombers vectoring for *Oriflamme's* reactor bulge. If Thrawn wanted to try the same ploy he'd just used on Tavira, the alien was getting desperate.

"Captain Bremel," he called, "Are our tractor beam operating ready?"

"Standing by as ordered, sir."

"Excellent. Helm, lower us down. Get us as close to *Grey Wolf* as we can without knocking shields. And make sure our interceptors are on those Starwings."

Assents echoed around the bridge. Grant watched the holo again and saw his TIEs clash with Thrawn's attack craft. A few of them shot off missiles but not nearly enough; they scattered and dissolved and the shields over the generator bulge remained intact.

Grey Wolf was still pumping a rain of turbolaser fire upward, though, without much care of hitting specific targets. Thrawn clearly wanted to keep Grant's shields on the verge of overload and prevent him from mustered a strong counter-offensive.

The brunt of *Grey Wolf's* guns was raking the aft section of *Oriflamme's* hull, but soon the star destroyer would pass ahead and bring its main batteries to bear on Grant's main hangar section.

It was time to act. Grant called, "Tell the first four tractors to begin."

Grant wasn't too proud to steal; he'd gotten the idea from Makati's tactics at Bandomeer. Like all destroyers of its class, *Oriflamme* had eight tractor beam generators placed around the mouth of its main hangar bay, plus two more outside its forward secondary hangar. The tractors were as useful for capturing enemy ships as they were for safely reeling in damaged TIE fighters. A fine-tuned tractor battery could even grab hold of something as small as a proton mine, and very capable operators could effectively move, release, and throw objects through the vacuum.

Throwing objects via tractor beam could, at best, set them going at one-quarter the speed of a missile with independent thrusters, but none of these warheads had far to go. They were likewise extremely difficult to aim, but a mile-long star destroyer at near-collision range was impossible to miss. The tracking systems for a star destroyer's guns followed targets by their thrust signature and the mines' small size made them difficult to target manually when stationary.

When the first four tractor beam operators threw their mines, *Grey Wolf* didn't see them coming at all. It still had shields to full power over its entire dorsal superstructure, with meant the first three mines simply impacted on the energy screens. The last slipped through and exploded in the direct dead center of the star destroyer's hull, obliterating its forward launch control tower and central ion cannon array.

The concussive shock from the explosions was enough to send trembles though *Oriflamme*, all the way to the command deck. Grant stayed on his feet and ordered, "Tractors five through eight, go!"

Thrawn knew what was coming this time and began firing everything he had at the main hangar complex. One proton mine exploded just after it was thrown, and the explosion overloaded a patch of *Oriflamme*'s shields and caused them to collapse. Another mine exploded against *Grey Wolf*'s shields. The other two got through. One landed just forward of the command tower and gored a flaming hole in the heart of the ship. The second landed on the destroyer's port turbo-laser battery row and tore a hole through the ship's side.

"Admiral, *Grey Wolf*'s engines are failing," Captain Bremel reported. "Her shields are down. She's coasting dead in space."

He'd done it. After everything, he'd finally *done* it. *Oriflamme* still had two more mines ready to throw and could obliterate its command tower with ease. Even if Tavira somehow slipped away with Starflare, he'd bested the upstart alien who'd squirmed his way into a grand admiral's uniform, and right now that felt immeasurably more important. Grant felt like shouting and throwing his fists in the air.

Instead he took a deep, deep breath and said, "Comm, hail that ship. I want to talk to Grand Admiral Thrawn."

The damage reports were too much to take in, and Dagon Niriz knew it was over. Flame and debris still poured into space from the massive hole the mine had gouged out of the superstructure ahead of them. Through the field of twisted, floating metal he could look out the forward viewport and see *Oriflamme*'s superstructure slipping past overhead, too slowly.

Niriz took a deep breath. He was surprised how *okay* he felt. Not good, not after fighting so hard and failing, but he felt *okay*. He'd held Grant here for hours, far from Orron III, and given Thrawn the best chance he could.

He said, "Comm, hail *Corvus*." Nobody seemed to hear him over the alarms and shouted, panicked reports, so he walked over to the comm station, grabbed an ensign by the shoulder, and said, "Grant will be going for *Corvus* next. Tell her to wait until Grant gets close to firing range, then drop gravity wells. He should leave her alone then, and it will give the admiral a little more time."

The young Troukree looked up at Niriz, blinked, then nodded stupidly.

"Do it, Ensign."

He did. Like so many of them, he was too young to die.

"One more thing," he said. "Tell *Corvus* to salvage as many people from this ship as she can..."

He couldn't quite bring himself to say, *if there's anyone left*.

The ensign nodded again and go to work. From another console, the comm lieutenant said, "Captain, we have incoming. It's from *Oriflamme*."

Niriz took a deep breath. He tugged his uniform straight; somehow it felt important. He walked over to the lieutenant and said, "Put him on."

Niriz had never spoken with Grand Admiral Grant before, or any grand admiral besides Thrawn. He had gray hair, narrow eyes, and a lined aged face; the broad shoulders and epaulet on his uniform looked a little too big for him.

His voice was crisp and precise but shot through with anger as he said, "Who are you? I want to speak with Grand Admiral Thrawn."

"I am Dagon Niriz, captain of the star destroyer *Grey Wolf*."

"I don't care who you are. Where is Thrawn?"

"Thrawn is not aboard this vessel."

"What? But that's his ship, I know it is."

Niriz considered, then decided not to tell Grant that Thrawn had gone ahead to Orron III. "The grand admiral is absent at this time. He charged me to lead the fight."

Grant's face ran through a chain of emotions; first disbelief, then indignation, then scowling anger, and finally sighing resignation.

Finally, his holographic eyes locked on Niriz's. He said, "You fought well, Captain."

"Thank you."

"I hope Thrawn knows how loyal you were in the end."

"I hope so too, sir." He hoped it more than anything.

Grant nodded slightly and said, "Goodbye, Captain Niriz."

The holo winked off. Niriz turned away. He walked slowly over to the tactical station. Despite all the system failures the holo was still up.

He planted a hand on the ensign's shoulder and asked, "What have we got?"

She jerked slightly at his touch but said, "It looks like they have two more mines held at the secondary hangar bay."

"Can we fire on them?"

"All guns are down, sir."

Without taking his hand off her shoulder he shifted his stance so he could see *Oriflamme's* underside running over their heads. The small forward hangar was nearly right above them.

"Sir..." the ensign started, but said nothing more. Her shoulder was shaking. Niriz squeezed it tighter.

He couldn't remember her name. She was young, and pretty; he'd never noticed that before. He would have, once, a long time ago. There was so much he'd given up in service of the cause.

He thought he saw a flicker of fast motion outside *Oriflamme's* secondary hangar. As the last mines fell to meet them he squeezed her shoulder tighter and said, "We held, Ensign. We held."

As the escort shuttle soared skyward, Soontir Fel found the strength to climb against strong g-forces and pull himself into the cockpit. Quiller was at the helm and one of the green-scaled aliens at the co-pilot's seat. Thrawn held tight to the latter's seat and Fel placed himself behind Quiller. Stars filled the forward viewport.

"That Marauder corvette is gaining fast," Thrawn said, voice cool and steady even now. Somehow his calm made him seem even more alien.

"I see it," the co-pilot said. "Trying to hit it with the rear cannon but it has front shields on full power."

A few laser blasts streaked ahead of them. "They're warning shots," Fel said. "Keep going!"

"I don't know if they've got anything to lose by shooting us down at this point," said Quiller.

"I'll keep shooting at them," said the co-pilot, "But... Oh. That's not good."

"What is it?" Fel strained to see his sensor screen.

"That," Thrawn said, and pointed out the forward viewport.

Fel saw it now. They'd cleared the atmosphere and the stars shone strong ahead. Dead in the center of the starfield were the off-white diamond-shapes of two Imperial star destroyers.

"Vaantaar," Thrawn said, "Is *Grey Wolf* still in the system?"

The co-pilot glanced at his scanners. "Yes, Admiral. But..." He swallowed. "Sir, *Grey Wolf* is dead in space. Her entire command tower was been vaporized. *Corvus* has lowered her gravity wells and is taking as many of her crew aboard as she can."

More lasers from the corvette speared past them. Thrawn swallowed and asked, "What are those ships ahead?"

"*Oriflamme* and *Invidious*, sir."

For a second, Thrawn's body seemed to sag forward, his head bent low and he looked like an awful weight was crushing him.

Grief only lasted a moment; then he sucked in breath, stood straight again, and said with a shaking voice, "Can we jump to hyperspace before they reach us?"

"We'll be okay so long as that corvette doesn't shoot us down," said Quiller, "Oh, fierfek!"

The shuttle shook harder than before; Fel was nearly thrown forward onto Quiller's back. The pilot said, "That one broke our shields! We can hold for now but they're definitely not kidding around!"

"What about the hyperdrive?" asked Fel.

"Holding for now. One more hit and we're dead in space."

"Wait," the co-pilot said, "I'm getting another ship coming from the planet. One X-wing, coming up fast!"

When that Imperial escort shuttle soared into the sky, Wedge Antilles stopped in the grass and watched it go for approximately five awful seconds. Then he sprinted for his X-wing.

Over a decade as a combat pilot had honed his senses of space and direction; even in the night, even after the frantic fight after leaving the corvette, he knew exactly where to find his X-wing. He crawled into the still-open cockpit, fired up the engines, and strapped on his helmet.

By the time he got in the air, the Marauder corvette had already taken off. It was a big ship but a fast one, and it was flying in straight pursuit of the escort shuttle as it climbed toward the stars. Wedge checked his scanners and saw, beyond those two ships, a pair of massive Imperial star destroyers flying to the planet.

He screamed inside his cockpit. If he didn't shoot down that corvette, Tavira would get Syal. If he did kill it, then Isard would claim her instead.

There was no way to win.

The only battle he could fight was right in front of him. He armed his torpedoes and settled on the corvette's aft. It seemed so intent on shooting at the shuttle that it was paying barely any attention to him. One defensive turret swung around to spray lasers back at him, but he dodged them easily. He dropped his reticule on the glow of its starboard engine, the one he'd already hit before on the way down, and popped off two torpedoes.

The first impacted on the shields; the second broke through. The corvette shuddered under the explosion. The starboard thruster sputtered and died, cutting the corvette's speed in half as it tried to climb into orbit. Suddenly it was falling aft—first right onto Wedge; he nimbly flipped his fighter over the ship's nose, cut his own speed, and sprayed laser blasts all over its hull. As they breached the atmospheric envelope and entered orbit, Wedge gave his thrust engines one forward kick, then killed them entirely. He used his directional

repulsors to spin himself nose-over-tail to face the dark night-side face of Orron III and the corvette struggling to surge past it.

He targeted the glow of the command deck and fired off all the torps he had left. The first two impacted on the ship's forward shields; the rest tore through the bridge's viewport and exploded the hull from the inside-out. The corvette seemed to stall for a moment in low orbit; then its flaming debris tumbled back toward the planet far below.

Wedge spun his fighter back around again and chased the shuttle.

"Wow!" Quiller marvelled as he looked at his rear scanners. "That X-wing took out the corvette all but itself! Who was flying that thing?"

"My brother-in-law," Fel said with satisfaction.

Then he heard Syal's voice saying, "What happened to Wedge?"

She was holding tight onto the cockpit doorframe, peeking her head between Fel's and Thrawn's shoulders.

"He's all right," Fel said and drew an arm around her shoulders. It was the second thing he'd said to her in six months. He'd never been sure what their reunion would be like, but he'd never expected this.

"That X-wing's dead behind us," the co-pilot said, "And a bunch of Grant's TIEs are right on their way!"

"Hail that X-wing!" Syal lurched forward. "I have to talk to Wedge!"

The co-pilot looked back at Thrawn. "Admiral, we just cleared the gravity well. Those TIEs will be on us in minutes."

"Please, sir," Fel said. "Let us try."

"Grant's destroyer is pumping out a lot of jamming," Quiller said. "I don't know if it can get through."

Thrawn sucked in breath. "One minute."

Static burst in Wedge's helmet comlink, making him wince as he got closer and closer to the escort shuttle. It wasn't using its rear cannon to fire at him, but he had no idea what to do when he caught up with it.

A part of him knew that, if Isard was going to capture Fel, he had a duty to the New Republic prevent that any way he could, even if it meant shooting down the shuttle.

But he'd left the New Republic behind on Etti IV. He'd left everything behind except the sister who was ahead of him now, about to slip away forever.

A voice broke through the static, high and female and familiar from a lifetime ago: "Can you hear me? Wedge?"

"Syal?" he barked. "Syal is that you?"

"Wedge?" Her voice faded in and out of static. "Please... Respond, Wedge!"

"Damn it!" Wedge pounded his console. "Syal, what's happening? How did you get this comm?"

There was more static; he could barely make out the words, "...go, Wedge."

"No! Syal, I'm, not letting Isard take you! Syal, can you hear me?"

More static, and then the clear words: "I'm sorry, Wedge."
And then his world ended.

Fel held Syal's shoulders and she leaned in between Quiller and Vaantaar's seats to speak into the console's audio grille, saying, "Wedge? Can you hear me? Wedge?"

There was a burst of static, but Fel thought he could hear someone calling her name.

"Wedge?" Syal repeated, "Please, is you can hear this, respond, Wedge!"

Static drowned out any reply. Vaantaar said nervously, "Those TIEs are almost in firing range. We have to go."

"Hyperdrive's ready," Quiller said.

Syal was crying now, saying "We can't stay here We have to go, Wedge! *You* have to go!"

Through the noise they could barely hear Wedge's desperate voice say, "Syal, can you hear me?"

"Time's up!" Vaantaar called.

"I'm sorry, Wedge," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

"Jump!" said Thrawn.

The stars and TIE fighters and destroyers ahead of them vanished in an instant. The light-blur of hyperspace filled their viewport and Syal sagged against her husband's arms.

She cried against his shoulder, whispering, "Not again... Not again..."

Quiller, Vaantaar, and Thrawn all looked away, though in this cramped cockpit there was little else to see. Fel wrapped his arms around her back and clutched her shoulders and held her for as long as she needed.

His X-wing soared through space, but Wedge didn't touch the control stick. TIE fighters were screaming toward him and were almost in firing range, but he barely noticed.

He couldn't find a reason to do anything; not even lift his hand.

He didn't understand how Syal had been able to call him, or why that shuttle had jumped to hyperspace instead of flying right to the closest star destroyer. The pilot, probably, had been afraid Wedge would fire a torpedo at his own sister rather than let her fall into enemy hands.

It was a ruthless, Imperial way of thinking. It may have been right. He couldn't imagine what fate awaited Fel and Syal. He didn't want to. Whatever it was, it was his fault.

The TIEs were getting close now. The first flecks of green laser-blasts whipped by, though none came close to hitting.

Go, Wedge! That's what she'd told him. He didn't even know where to go. He's deserted the New Republic, the Rogues, his friends, all to watch his sister sail away from his again.

Another laser came closer enough to flash green light over his face.

Go, Wedge!

It was all he could do. *Go.*

He reached out. He touched his controls and warmed up the hyperdrive. He touched the control stick and, on instinct, shuddered his fighter to one side, nimbly avoiding another laser volley.

When his ship was ready, he did what his sister told him to. He went.

Grand Admiral Octavian Grant stood at the fore of *Oriflamme's* bridge. Before him lay the dark face of Orron III, the remains of his fighter wing, and nothing else.

Cautiously, Captain Bremel said, "That X-wing has jumped to hyperspace, sir... Just like the shuttle."

"What about our troops on the ground?"

"They're not responding to our hails, sir."

Grant stared at the blackness ahead and said nothing. He felt hollow beyond words.

A minute later, Bremel spoke again. "Sir, tactical reports that *Invidious* is breaking away. It looks like she's moving for an exit vector."

"Let her run," Grant sighed. Tavira had gotten more out of today than he had, and in her own way, the little trollop had earned it.

He stared at the blackness ahead for another minute. Then Bremel said, "Sir, that interdicator is still doing salvage on *Grey Wolf*. Should we move to engage?"

"Why?" He looked over his shoulder at the young man, finally.

Bremel thought on that. He couldn't find an answer either. Weakly, he said, "I was just asking, sir."

"Just plot us a course out of here, Captain."

"Yes, sir." He paused yet again, then asked, "Sir, where should we go?"

Grant looked away without responding. He stared at the stars and the black planet ahead of him, as though that great void could give him an answer. But it gave him nothing. It gave him nothing at all.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

ETTI IV

The last four X-wings in Rouge Squadron settled on the flanks of an ovoid *Bantha*-class assault shuttle as it soared low over the grassy fields of Etti IV. All five craft were heading for the smoking ruins of the Lanchenzoor estate, which was still trapped in the shadow of Grand Admiral Makati's star destroyer. At the same time, the other Imperial destroyer had interposed itself between *Steadfast* and *Emancipator*. Though it was lighting up *Emancipator*'s face with broadside volleys it couldn't do much against the old Clone Wars destroyer that had dropped in out of nowhere—Nrín Vakil still didn't know the story behind that— and didn't look like it would last that much longer.

Nrín was a little surprised that Makati hadn't resorted to typical Imp brutality and vaporized everything beneath *Steadfast* now that it looked like was going to lose his prize, but there was no point in asking questions when things were, very tentatively, going their way again.

"This Bantha One," a voice said in Nrín's headset. "We're going to be setting down on the north end of the promenade."

"Understood, One," said Hobbie. "We'll cover for you."

"Do you think they're still down there?" asked Nrín.

"Only one way to find out," said Janson.

Nrín hadn't had to explain that *they* meant both Princess Leia Organa and their own downed pilot Avan; Janson had already shot up an AT-ST that had pinned them both down at Avan's crashed X-wing, and they were gambling that the wounded pilot wouldn't have gotten far.

Losing Avan and Feylis one right after the other had jarred the remaining Rouges almost as much as Wedge and Fel's sudden disappearance. It had especially shaken Nrin, who'd heard familiar panic in Avan's voice when he'd thought Feylis had gone down without ejecting. He couldn't blame Avan for losing his focus after that; after Ibtisam's death it had taken Nrin weeks to really focus when he was inside his cockpit, and even now it was difficult. He'd quietly applied for a transfer out of the Rogues months ago but been denied because of the squadron's manpower shortage.

His squad-mates were luckier. The shuttle Bantha Three had already grabbed Feylis; he hoped she'd get her chance to be reunited with Avan soon enough.

"Imperials seemed to be moving their heavy vehicles outside estate grounds," Xarce observed as *Steadfast's* giant blue ion engines swelled right ahead of them.

"I don't like that," Nrin said. "They must be getting ready to pound everything beneath them."

"Then we make this quick," Hobbie said. "Bantha One, tell us when you're ready to drop."

"Couple squints at two o'clock," Janson warned.

"Copy. You and Xarce take 'em. Nrin, stay with me."

Nrin held his position on the shuttle's right flank while Janson and Xarce peeled away to fight back the TIEs. The remaining three ships dipped beneath the glare of *Steadfast's* engines and dove toward the main street running straight through the center of the estate. The star destroyer's ventral turbolasers began taking potshots at the hefty assault shuttle but they still couldn't nail their target.

"Getting ready to drop," called Bantha One. "Three. Two. One. Drop!"

Nrin and Hobbie kicked their retro-burners on to slow their X-wings as the assault shuttle killed its engines and rose its repulsors down to the rubble-strewn street. As he and Hobbie began flying tight protective circles directly above the landed shuttle, Nrin leaned close to the edge of his cockpit and peered down. He could see Avan's wrecked X-wing at the end of a long scorched streak, and the still-standing legs of the headless AT-ST that Janson had killed.

Then he saw figures scurrying toward the shuttle, and his heart lifted.

Leia waved them on toward the shuttle's open bay doors: dozens of civilian estate staff who'd been trapped by Grand Admiral Makati's sudden arrival. A *Bantha*-class assault shuttle had room for nearly a hundred people, and she intended to get as many to safety as she could. She'd already tasked two Espos to make sure Avan got on safe, and they'd been the first ones aboard.

As more piled onto the shuttle she felt her comlink buzz in her gown's tiny pocket. She took one look up the sky, at the two circling X-wings and the destroyer still overhead, then answered.

"We're at the shuttle now," she called. "Main promenade!"

"We saw it and we're coming now," Borsk Fey'lya panted on the other end. He sounded like he was sprinting her way as they spoke.

"Hurry up. The shuttle's filling up fast."

Leia stuffed her comlink into her pocket. She looked back to the shuttle; Winter was waving more refugees into its maw. The white-haired woman caught Leia's eye and hurried back down the line back to her friend. Winter looked faintly bizarre as she readjusted the strap of the blaster rifle hanging off the shoulder, while at the same time gusts of air generated by the shuttle's repulsors played chaotically with her long hair and the chopped-off skirt of what had once been a formal gown. Of course, Leia had no doubt she looked just as ridiculous.

"Are the others coming?" Winter asked her.

"Borsk said they're on their way."

"How much longer?" Winter looked up at the star destroyer.

"I don't know. It sounded like he was running hard."

"We all got our exercise today," muttered Winter.

Before Leia could respond, they heard the sound of blasterfire. Suddenly a mass of people charged around a corner and onto the promenade near Avan's crashed X-wing. Amazingly enough, Borsk Fey'lya was leading the charge, running for his life with his aides right behind him and a

handful of Espos at the rear, providing covering fire against a group of stormtroopers.

Winter grabbed Leia's arm and pulled her toward the shuttle. The last few refugees had scrambled aboard and the two women climbed onto the loading dock without ducking inside. The extra elevation gave them the range they needed, and they began firing down at the approaching stormtroopers.

Fey'lya and the other two Bothans were first onto the ramp. As Im'nel and Brei'lya ran inside, Fey'lya nearly collapsed against the bay doors. Falanthas and Viceprex Malor'dacan rushed past him into the shuttle; after that there were only Espos.

"Come on!" Leia called to them as more stormtroopers appeared in the street. "Into the shuttle! Now!"

"What happened to the Prex?" asked Winter. Leia hadn't even noticed Zrey Go'thal was missing.

"The stormtroopers got him. Captured," Fey'lya wheezed as the first Espos jumped onto the landing ramp. Leia had no idea what would happen to these men, now that their government would officially brand them traitors, but they'd fought well today. Maybe the New Republic had a place for anyone, even them.

When the last Espo was aboard, Leia finally went inside the shuttle. By that point the craft was already beginning to rise on its repulsors. Leia slipped and shouldered her way through the packed cargo hold to the cockpit. By the time they got there the estate grounds were falling fast beneath them; soon they'd rise above the observation tower there they'd started this very long day.

Leia asked the pilot, "Are we at capacity? Or can we get more people?"

The man shook his head. "Sorry, Councilor. The Imps are pulling their troops out. That destroyer could start raining hellfire on us any minute."

Leia grimaced, but she knew there was nothing they could do. She saw X-wings settling on either side of them as they punched toward the sunlit clouds. Stray laser blasts knocked against the shuttle's shields, but they kept flying true, and soon enough they escaped from beneath *Steadfast* and sunlight fell from a beautiful cloud-streaked sky.

"Incoming call," the co-pilot said. "It's from Rogue Leader."

"Put him on," Leia said, leaning awkwardly over his shoulder to get close to the speaker grille. "We have Avan. Repeat, we picked him up, he's fine."

"Great to hear it," came the reply. It was a familiar voice, but it wasn't Wedge. It wasn't Tycho either. Leia could picture the dour face but for the life of her she couldn't find a name.

"This is Rogue Leader, correct?" she said.

"That's right. Hobbie Klivian."

There it was. "What happened to Wedge? Is he okay?"

There was an awful too-long pause before Klivian said, "I'm sorry, I just don't know. I'll explain later."

Before Leia could ask any more, the pilot announced that they were beginning their climb out of the atmosphere. The force of accelerate pressed Leia against the cockpit's rear bulkhead. Clouds filled the viewport ahead of them, soothing swirls of fat vaporous white against a pale blue backdrop. It had seemed beautiful just a moment ago; now, the bright scene felt darkened by uncertainty.

But there was nothing Leia could do about it now. She gripped the back of the pilot's seat with both hands as they soared toward freedom.

Grand Admiral Makati's heart clenched in his chest as he watched *Tenacious* fall nose-first from the sky. When the two Rebel star destroyers had finally moved, they'd attacked with unchecked ferocity. The old *Venator*-class ship had pounded *Tenacious*'s aft while the former *Accuser* pulled into a steep climb and fire broadsides that tore another massive flaming hole in the ship's port side.

Worse was the knowledge that the Rebels would have never fought like this if they'd been worried about protecting their people on the ground. They'd come charging even before Makati had initiated bombardment of the estate grounds, which meant they'd managed to successfully evacuate their people.

And that meant everything Makati had done since coming to the Corporate Sector had been for nothing.

Now, from his spot on a command deck still littered with blaster-scorched bodies, he watched as *Tenacious's* engines died and its bow tipped toward the great sprawling fields below. Starfighters, Rebel and Imperial alike, soared away as fast as they could before the destroyer hit the surface. At first it seemed to crumple bow-to-stern under its own weight and the pull of Etti IV's gravity; then its atmosphere-fueled fires burst out of the hull, throwing scorched debris in all direction. The shockwave of the explosion buffeted all the ships in the air and Makati was nearly thrown off his feet.

Behind him, he heard Captain Vivant telling Helm to take them out of here as fast as possible. He hurried over to the tactical station and saw what he'd been afraid to see: *Accuser* was still pulling upward with the intent of cutting off *Steadfast's* ascent, while the old Venator was coming in low to take him from behind. Far in orbit, those Mon Cal Cruisers were waiting, but those were the least of his concerns. The two destroyers in the atmosphere were dead-set on preventing from getting to orbit at all.

A voice in Makati's head told him he couldn't let himself die like this. Not after narrowly surviving an assassination attempt on his own bridge. Not after coming so far and failing.

He couldn't die without redeeming himself.

He looked back at the fireball *Tenacious* had left behind as it burned bright on the horizon, and his mind flashed back to the sight of the warship seemingly collapsing under its own weight.

Some things were so obvious you forget about them.

"Captain!" he called to Vivant. "Tell the hangar crews to load every ship they can into the docking clamps. Get ready to drop them."

Vivant stared in confusion. "*Drop, sir?*"

"I said *drop*. Take all our extra shuttles, scout craft, anything that's not in the air. If we have extra warheads, load them aboard. But not *people*. Do you understand?"

"Sir, I don't"

He jabbed a finger to the tactical display. "They Venator is coming up beneath us to to force us into *Accuser*. Directly beneath us, Captain."

Recognition lit in his eyes. "Oh. Oh, sir, do you think that will work? Their shields--"

"We can overwhelm them. Just do it, Captain. Drop *everything!*"

Vivant rushed away to comply. Makati didn't know if it would break the shields, or if it would work at all, but it was the only chance he had.

He watched the tactical holo closely. Sure enough, the Clone Wars destroyer had settled right beneath him and was pumping turbolasers right into *Steadfast's* ventral shields. It was rising steadily up on its repulsorlifts, forcing Makati toward *Accuser*, which was planning to cut in on his starboard flank and probably pulverize his command tower.

"Captain," he called, "Tell me when they're ready!"

"They're hurrying, sir!"

Accuser would be within firing range very soon. *Steadfast* hadn't taken too much damage in the battle so far but it wouldn't last long against that destroyer, not when the Mon Cal ships above started raining down laserfire, which they'd do soon enough. The one good sign was that the Venator was holding place right beneath them.

He considered signaling Shadow Squadron but held off. He needed to save that surprise for last.

Finally, Vivant said, "Sir, they're ready."

"Do it now, Captain! Drop everything!"

He wished he could have seen it with his own eyes, the shock on the faces of the Venator's crew. Instead he had to satisfy himself with the tactical display and a vivid imagination. He pictured hundreds of tons of equipment- disabled TIE fighters, spare assault shuttles, speeder bikes, cargo crates- all tumbling out of the main hangar and falling like oversized bullets onto the Rebel star destroyer.

For the first few seconds it looked like the ship's dorsal shields were holding; then some large object tore through and impacted on its bow. Something else, something with a live warhead inside, plunged through the hull next and detonated inside the superstructure.

"Admiral, the Venator's stopped climbing!" The tactical lieutenant sounded as surprised as he was happy.

"All ventral cannons, fire downward. Kill that ship if you can," Makati commanded. "Helm, take us up as fast as you can. Shields, all power to starboard."

The ship's artificial gravity systems groaned in protest as they stabbed toward the stars perpendicular to the planet below. At the same time, *Accuser* peppered their flank with turbolaser blasts but couldn't break through.

That left one problem.

Makati half-walked, half-slid across the inclined deck to the comm station. He clung to the back of the lieutenant's chair and said, "Hail Shadow Squadron. Tell them to do it. Do it now."

The comm officer complied. Still holding his chair, Makati glanced across the room at the tactical holo. The TIE Phantoms had kept their stygium cloaks on since leaving *Steadfast's* hangar, and not even friendly scanners would trace their movements. Makati wasn't watching for that, though. The whole ship shuddered as they pierced the atmospheric envelope and soared into space, right toward the waiting Mon Cal cruisers.

The first lights started winking on the holo, and the tactical crew started reading off reports of explosions at key shield projectors and weapon emplacements on the Mon Cal ships. Those cruisers had been simply waiting for Makati to come to them without having to engage any Imperial ships in space, and they'd lowered their weapons without suspecting that cloaked ships had settled near key locations on their hull.

Each TIE Phantom could only hit one target at a time, but they could move quickly from one to another, and they knew which to take out first. As *Steadfast* soared into orbit, leaving *Accuser* to chase its tail, the two cruisers frantically tried to turn their hulls to angle sides with operable weapon systems at the approaching star destroyer.

As the crippled warships appeared through the forward viewport, Makati was very tempted to engage them. He fought down the urge; even if they did stop to destroy just one more enemy cruiser, it would give time for the fully-functional *Accuser* to catch up.

"Captain Vivant," he said smoothly.

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Tell Shadow Squadron to return to the barn. Once they're accounted for, fire up the hyperdrive and take us home."

"With pleasure, sir."

It was wiser and safer to forgo the kill and get out of here. Judging from the cheers that had already broken out across his normally well-ordered bridge, he didn't think his crew would mind.

As they soared past the Mon Cal ships, Makati allowed himself to close his eyes and let go of a long, relieved sigh. He'd failed in his mission to the Corporate Sector, and *Vengeance* had disappeared under his watch. This mission was a failure and he'd have to answer to Isard for that.

But still, he kept his eyes closed and listened to the cheers from his soldiers who'd lived to fight another day. Right now, they were all he needed. They were all he could ever want.

Before *Fang Zar* impacted on the surface of Etti IV, its crew took emergency measures to prevent it from exploding as horrifically as *Tenacious*. They managed to level out its nose and fire all bottom repulsors to cushion the blow, though the impact still threw every standing crewman to the deck.

In the end, *Fang Zar* smashed into the surface but did not ignite. Its hull tore a long black gash across the rolling fields before coming to a halt. The third scar in the landscape cut a neat straight line between the rubble of the Lanchenoor estate on one side and *Tenacious'* black, still-burning crater on the other.

Garm Bel Iblis had just barely managed to grab hold of the closest console before the impact. He'd still been knocked forward and his head had slammed into a bulkhead, dropping him unconscious. When he came to he found himself staring up the ceiling of his bridge. The air smelled like smoke and maybe the air was smoky too, or maybe he had a concussion; everything looked blurry. He felt something warm and wet run down his forehead and wondered if it was blood. He twitched his arms and legs; they all moved on command. Somehow, his old body hadn't failed him yet.

He struggled to prop himself up on his elbow. Someone knelt down beside him and helped him sit up right. He was

unsurprised to find Sena Leikvold Midanyl at his side yet again.

"Sena," he muttered, wiping at his forehead, "Report."

"All engines dead, sir. We can't contact anyone forward of Section 11 and below Deck 17."

That was over half the ship. He couldn't begin to count those dead. "What about Makati?"

"He escaped, sir. He did something to the Mon Cal ships in orbit and sailed free. I'm sorry, sir."

"No. No, *I'm* sorry." He looked down at his hand and blinked his eyes into focus; the blood there was like an accusation. "We should never have come here. This ship... All our soldiers... We should have left Mon Mothma's people to fight this fight."

"Sir, please, don't apologize."

"We shouldn't have been fighting her war."

"Sir, *please*," Sena said firmly, "We still helped save Fey'lya and Organa. And we gave that super star destroyer a good beating."

Now he was starting to wonder if he was hallucinating. "Sena, what are you talking about? You counseled me *against* this mission."

"Maybe I was wrong."

"Tell that to everyone under Deck 17." He shook his head. "Don't tell me you want to throw in with Mon Mothma now?"

"Well, the comms are still working. Admiral Drayson called and offered assistance."

He considered that for a long, long moment. Then he asked, "What about *Peregrine* and *Harrier*? Are they in orbit?"

"Yes, sir. They've also got rescue crews on the way."

"Then it's all we'll need. Tell Drayson we politely decline his offer. We're not fighting their wars any more after this, Sena. Never again."

"Yes, sir," she said, but he could see the doubt in her eyes.

The doubt stayed with him even after she left to relay his orders. Without *Fang Zar* they'd be down to just six old dreadnaughts, compared to the ever-growing fleet under Mon Mothma. Garm Bel Iblis had made a career out of stubborn idealism and hopeless causes, but there was still a practical

core in him, deep down, that knew the rift between two Old Republic senators could only end one way.

But then he looked around the bridge and smelled the smoke and thought of all his dead. It might end, but not today.

There was still too much blood on the scales.

Once the post-battle checks were complete and *Steadfast* had sailed well clear of the Corporate Sector, Grand Admiral Afsheen Makati finally retreated to his personal quarters. After everything that had happened he felt light-headed and dazed, and he'd repeatedly checked with Captain Vivant to make sure atmosphere levels between all sections of the ship really had equalized. According to Vivant the air was perfectly breathable all over, which meant the only thing that could be affecting Makati was sheer, overwhelming relief at having survived Etti IV.

When he went to his cabin he entered the keycode and slipped through the open portal. The door slid shut behind him. He froze where he was, took a deep deep breath, and realized, at last, how damned tired he was. He hadn't slept since before getting the call from Isard on Bonadan, telling him to rush to where he really quarry was. He recalled he'd been awake for almost ten hours before that, and he had been acting on pure adrenaline since then.

A small part of him wanted to call F-4GR and get a shot of tea. The rest of him just wanted to surrender to his bed. He'd have to answer to Isard soon enough, and it was sure be an ugly conversation. For now, the escape from Etti IV still felt like a victory. He wanted to go to sleep with the satisfaction that he'd saved his ship and his crew against terrible odds. He hoped it brought good dreams.

He unbuttoned his uniform jacket and stepped into the foyer. F-4GR was standing right where Makatti had left him. The droid's glowing photoreceptors stared dead ahead; he didn't seem to have registered his master's arrival at all.

"Forger," Makati called. "Are you all right?"

The droid's head spun to look at him. The light in his photoreceptors flickered for a moment, like there'd been a small power surge in his main cortex.

“Forger?” Makati repeated. “What’s wrong?”

The droid said, “I’m very sorry sir.”

“Sorry about what?” Makati frowned.

It happened so fast he could barely resister it all: the droid’s arm rising up, the forearm plate sliding away, the blaster snapping into view, and the flash of light that ended everything.

EPILOGUE: REENLISTMENT

INVIDIOUS

After escaping the Orron system and plotting a route out of the Corporate Sector, Leonia Tavira had decided the first thing she needed was a shower.

The one inside Captain Morux's quarters was excellent, with a warm temperature and a steady soothing water-stream. Before going in she scoured the rest of his cabin too. Based on his belongings, the man had been a sabacc enthusiast, an amateur blitzball player, and, a little surprisingly, a collector of fine wines. Tavira decided the last would make a good start in rebuilding her collection of spirits.

As happy as she was to have *Invidious*, a part of her mourned the loss of *Courtesan*, and not only for the spoils she'd kept aboard. The corvette had been small but agile, pretty but durable, easily underestimated but considerably dangerous. That was how she liked to think of herself too, which was why she'd taken to it in the first place.

Still, she'd traded the lesser ship for the greater one and had no regrets. She was disappointed to have lost Wukh, as well as Van Tyrac. The latter had been too ambitious and would probably have tried to betray her eventually, so in that sense it was good he was gone. Still, his Force powers were useful, and she made a mental note to seek out his home-world. He'd said it was still under an Imperial heel, but she'd find a way to make that work for her. She always did.

She'd set a time to meet with Billibango to go over all the repairs and work that needed to be done on the ship, but Captain Morux's shower had been so soothing she'd lost

track of time. She'd scrambled to dry herself off and, realizing nothing in Morux's wardrobe would fit, simply threw on the jacket of her old Moff's uniform before dashing out the door barefoot and barelegged.

She found the Xexto slicer waiting for her on the bridge. Rossk and his enforcers had cleared out all its former crew and, aside from Tavira and Billibango, the whole deck was yawning and empty.

Billigango took her over to one of the operating stations and started showing her schematics of the ship, explaining what kind of damage they'd taken and what they'd need to do to repair it.

"Finding replacement parts for a stolen star destroyer won't be easy," he warned her.

"I know. I'm willing to take time to patch this ship up, even if it means laying low for a time."

"It's also designed for a crew of over thirty thousand beings. After losing *Courtesan*, we've got less than two hundred."

"We have ourselves a star destroyer, Billibango. Pirates from across the galaxy will *flock* to this ship. We only need to hold our own until we build up a good crew. How are the automated systems?"

"They can get us from place to place but not much more. We barely made it through that fight, and only because a lot of the Imperial crew realized they had to help us or die." Billibango turned away from the display and looked straight at her. "What do we do with thirty thousands captives?"

"Sell them for necessary materials, I imagine."

"Slaves, then?"

"Yes. I was thinking Hutt space. They're still in the market and I'm sure they'd have resources to fix *Invidious*."

Billibango nodded. "All right. I'll see who has contacts."

Tavira smiled at him. "You're quite industrious. How would you like to be my new first officer?"

He blinked in surprise and looked around the big, empty bridge. "Captain, I'd be honored."

"I thought as much. Now, what else did you have planned?"

"I also wanted to go down to the hangar bay. It's full of TIE fighters and other equipment that need beings who can work them."

"I understand. We'll have to work on recruiting starfighter pilots." She looked around the empty bridge. "Go on ahead, Billibango. I'll catch up with you shortly."

The Xexto nodded and walked off the deck. She watched him until he was gone, then spun in a slow circle and took in everything. She walked down the center aisle of the bridge, savoring every touch of cool deck plating on her bare feet. She continued up to the forward viewport and looked out at the off-white spread of a star destroyer stretching out a mile ahead of her. Stars spanned in every direction like infinite possibilities.

It was everything she'd ever wanted. Tavira started giggling, alone on the empty bridge. Lightheaded and giddy, she keeled forward and braced herself against the viewport, palms flat on vacuum-cooled transparisteel. Everything she'd ever done, from her childhood on Eiattu onward, felt like had been leading to this moment. Everything had been means to this end, even the Imperial uniform she'd worn.

She realized that now, finally, she had no need of it. She'd surpassed it. She hastily tore open her jacket and cast it off, throwing it into the crew pit. With a wide-eyed and joyous smile, she pressed her back against the transparisteel and felt the cold of space against naked skin. She spread bare arms and legs flat against it and felt all the stars spread out behind her while the heart of this beautiful ship lay before her, quietly waiting to give her anything she wanted.

She kept smiling an enraptured smile and knew deep down it was the happiest she'd ever be.

REAPER

The shuttle from *Oriflamme* set down in the middle of *Reaper's* vast hangar bay and was met with more than appropriate splendor. As he walked down the landing ramp and onto the deck Grant did a quick count: ten rows of stormtroopers on either side of the central aisle and twelve soldiers per row. In comparison to all that pomp. Grand Moff Kaine looked positively humble as he stood alone at the base of the ramp.

“Welcome aboard, Octavian,” Kaine said. “Welcome to the Pentastar Alignment.”

Grant stopped in front of Kaine, hesitated for a moment, then decided to salute. Their brief conversations since Orron III hadn’t determined the exact nature of their arrangement, but it felt like the right thing to do. Grant might be the Alignment’s new supreme military commander, but Kaine was still its governor.

“Walk with me, please,” Kaine said, and they began strolling past the lines of stormtroopers. “I just wanted to say again how pleased I am you came to join us.”

“It was the wisest course of action,” Grant said simply. His failure to either capture Starflare or kill Thrawn at Orron III had been just the first blow. Then had come the news of the Rebel leaders’ escape from Etti IV and Captain Sysco’s desertion. Where he’d taken the battered *Vengeance*, nobody seemed to know, but to lose a super star destroyer right after gaining it would have left Isard murderously angry.

Finally had come the news of Grand Admiral Makati’s assassination. Every loss until then had left Grant feeling hollow. That had left him angry. The man had performed brilliantly in battle once again, only to be murdered by Rebel sabotage. The news had also left Grant afraid; as the last grand admiral the Rebels knew about, there was no doubt they’d throw their assassins at him next, and Makati’s killing showed they weren’t to be underestimated. Given the pact Kaine had just made with the so-called New Republic leaders, the Pentastar Alignment had suddenly become the safest place in the galaxy, at least for Octavian Grant. So he’d ordered Captain Bremel to set a course and hailed Arduus Kaine requesting asylum and offering his services. Kaine had acted very pleased but Grant still felt like a beggar.

That was the worst part about Kaine’s warm mood and the grandiose reception. Deep down, Grant knew he didn’t deserve it.

Kaine didn’t bother to show off his super star destroyer as before. Instead they went up to his personal cabin and shared a bottle of that golden Sartinaynian brew.

“I’ll keep these quarters furnished for when I visit *Reaper*,” Kaine said as he poured, “But I intend to conduct most of my

business from Sartinaynian now. You'll have your own quarters prepared as you like them, of course."

Grant sat back in his chair and sipped from his glass. "Very well. If I can be blunt, what will I actually *use* this ship for?"

"Patrol the border. Uphold our territorial integrity."

"This isn't a warship. It's a deterrent."

"That's right. But as I mentioned before, so much of our fleet is otherwise... lacking. We've taken to refitting lots of *Vindicator*-type pickets because we don't have enough star destroyers. You can be very creative Octavian. I want you to find new ways to get the rest of our fleet in fighting shape."

"Fighting whom?"

"No one in the near future, I hope."

It was a smart, prudent, careful policy, but they both knew that one day someone would come for them. Once Zsinj, Isard, and the Rebels were done fighting each other the Pentastar Alignment would suddenly find itself with the same enemy on all sides. When that day came Grant would find himself a marked man yet again, and he'd have to make another decision as to where his future lay.

Kaine tapped a set of controls on his desk and projected a holo-image on the far wall. It showed a massive arena with the Imperial City skyline in the background. Armored storm-troopers, countless more than had just greeted Grant, filled the parade ground. Long lines of people were moving slowly along the central aisle, to and from a podium at the far end. The rectangular box of a coffin was so tiny it was barely visible.

"This is a live feed," Kaine explained. "They're giving him a full state funeral. I heard they've already started construction for a memorial on Monument Plaza."

Grant sighed and settled back in his chair. "He was a better man than I."

Kaine looked at him sharply. "You're the one who survived."

"Survival," Grant said, "is what I'm good at."

The grand admiral took another mouthful of his drink, let warm melancholy fill him, and watched the ceremony go on.

HOME ONE

The Empire was determined to give Grand Admiral Makati a hero's send-off, and his funeral ceremony was easy to watch, even aboard a New Republic warship. Hiram Drayson had been watching the first half-hour of the procession, wondering whether to open the bottom drawer of his desk, when the buzzer at his door went off.

Without checking to see who it was, he unlocked the door and let Borsk Fey'lya inside. He immediately turned off the holo-broadcast and sat straight upright in his chair.

"Councilor," Drayson nodded. "I'm glad to see you're in good health. What can I do for you?"

"You can start by answering a few questions," Fey'lya said. He stepped in front of Drayson's desk but didn't take the seat beside him. "I had an aide to my diplomatic team on Etti IV. I was wondering you could help me find him."

Drayson's throat went dry. Somehow, the Councilor knew. On instinct, he tried to deny it. "I'm not sure if that's my purview. Shouldn't you be contacting Bothan Diplomatic Corps?"

"Don't be coy with me, Admiral. He admitted to me that he worked for you."

Drayson couldn't think of anything to say, so he said nothing at all.

"When he explained to me that he was on a critical mission I let him go. I offered any help I could. As you should know, I have utmost respect for our intelligence agents." Fey'lya planted his paws on the desktop and leaned closer. "Everything looked different after Grand Admiral Makati laid siege to Etti IV. I can think of only one explanation to that chain of events, Admiral. Do you want to hear it?"

No, there wasn't a point in denial, not any more. "Your aide, Reyan Dey'rylan, was part of a plan to kill Grand Admiral Makati. We'd planned to lure him to Bonadan with false claims you were meeting CSA officials there. How he learned you were on Etti IV, I don't know."

Fey'lya's fur stood on end. "I don't know which is more offensive, Admiral. That you used me as bait for your ploy, or that you screwed up and nearly got me killed." Drayson

opened his mouth, but Fey'lya snapped, "Don't apologize, Admiral. I don't want to hear it. Tell me, who authorized this scheme? Admiral Ackbar?"

"Ackbar knew nothing of it. Admiral Burke, Dey'rylan and I came up with it."

The councilor looked honestly disappointed; he'd probably hoped to use this debacle to force his Mon Cal rival off the Provisional Council. When he spoke next he was quiet but still harsh. "You should know that I won't forget this, Admiral Drayson. I won't forget the kind of work you do."

"*Did*," Drayson corrected. "Dey'rylan and his entire team died on that mission."

Fey'lya's fur flattened. "Truly?"

"I wish it were otherwise."

The Bothan's gaze went distant. Softer than before he said, "I see. Well. At least they got their man."

"So it seems." Drayson just wished knew how they'd done it, but he never would, just like he'd never know how that alien assassin had sneaked aboard *Emancipator* and killed Admiral Burke.

Thoughtfully, Fey'lya said, "You know we Bothans honor our martyrs."

"The details of this operation will never be made public. You know that."

For a second, it seemed like, impossibly, Borsk Fey'lya didn't know what to say. Then he whispered, "I'll always remember what Dey'rylan did, Admiral. And you."

He looked at Drayson darkly for a moment, then turned away. He left without a word. Drayson stared at the closed door without feeling anything. Then he turned the holo back on and kept watching the funeral ceremony. People were still lined up to see Makati's coffin and the commentators were talking about the memorial they were going to build for the murdered hero. He still didn't feel anything.

Not ten minutes later, there was another knock on the door. Drayson checked the security cam this time, saw Admiral Ackbar, and let him in.

"Greetings," the Mon Cal said as he took a seat in front of Drayson's desk. "I wanted to speak with you in person now that you're back aboard."

Drayson had already given the admiral a full report on Burke's assassination via commlink, though there hadn't been much to tell. "Thank you for coming to see me. I was just... watching the procession." He touched the remote control and muted the audio from the broadcast, though it continued to play soundlessly.

Ackbar swung his bulbous eyes to watch it for a moment, then turned back to Drayson. He asked plainly, "Admiral, did you have a hand in that?"

Drayson considered denying it. He'd known that technically Fey'lya had had no power to punish him for his recent actions, but as Supreme Commander of the entire armed forces, Ackbar definitely could. He could and he *should*, because Drayson had gone behind his back, because they'd used Fey'lya and Organa as bait, because Drayson himself was the only one left alive that could be punished.

Ackbar would never trust him again if he knew; if he denied it, Ackbar still wouldn't trust him. So he told the truth. He let all of it spill, from his first hypothetical discussion with Dey'rylan to his talk with Fey'lya ten minutes ago.

When it was all over, Ackbar leaned back in his chair and folded his webbed hands in his lap. The first thing he said was, "You should have told me."

"I thought you'd shoot it down, sir."

"Yes, I certainly would have. And if I had, then Willham Burke would still be alive and so would Alpha Black. We might even be starting a new alliance with the Corporate Sector." Ackbar paused, then added, "And Makati would still be a threat."

"I'm not going to argue it was worth it, sir," said Drayson. "But I won't say it *wasn't* either."

In a contemplative tone, Ackbar said, "That is something we aren't able to judge now. Maybe we never will be able to judge. The question is what to do with the future."

Drayson nodded wordlessly. He had a hard time meeting the admiral's eyes.

"Alpha Black is over. General Cracken just reported that Grand Admiral Grant has fled to the Pentastar Alignment. Per our treaty with Kaine, the last grand admiral is beyond our justice now."

Drayson stared at his desk. It felt like such an anticlimax. He didn't know what to say.

"We still have much work to do," Ackbar continued. "Without Makati, Grant, or that super star destroyer, Isard is more weakened than ever. We must act fast to take advantage of that. And we'll need capable intelligence officers."

"Admiral, I apologize," Drayson blurted. "For all of this."

Ackbar nodded. "I know, Hiram. We'll need your services in the days ahead. I want you to promise me something."

"Yes, Admiral."

"No matter what scheme you think up, no matter what plan you have, you need to trust me. And you need to keep me informed. Do you understand?"

It almost sounded like forgiveness. Drayson nodded, "I do, sir. I understand."

"Then we'll speak again. I have another wayward soldier to speak with. Good day."

Ackbar rose and left the room. Drayson waited, then reached for the controls to turn on the holo-projector's sound. He froze, then pulled his hand back. He reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out on glass and a single bottle of Atrivis ale.

The booze had come from Jekk Karr, the glass from Kasck Fre'leir. Reyan Dey'rylan had sliced into Drayson's office and left it in his desk shortly before leaving for Etti IV. It had been a gift, and a promise to return.

Drayson stared at the holo-broadcast. The camera was zooming in on Makati's open coffin as he lay in state, his beautiful white uniform hiding all signs of violent death.

Drayson poured a mouthful of amber liquid into his glass. He thought of Dey'rylan, Kasck, Karr, Sheer, Ekrhine, Torr. He raised his cup and toasted the empty air, the silent room.

"Here's to you, gents," he said quietly, then drank.

It was Wedge's third debriefing since flying back to *Home One*. The first had been with some of Cracken's agents, then Cracken himself. That was when he'd been informed that Tycho Celchu had been captured during his spy mission to

Coruscant. He'd already been so hollowed by his other losses that he'd barely felt a thing.

This last talk was in Ackbar's office. The admiral had explained everything that had happened to the Rogue Squadron he'd left behind, including Avan and Feylis both crash-landing and getting retrieved during the battle.

"Flight Officer Ardele parachuted safely and is in good physical condition," Ackbar was saying. "Avan Beruss is a trickier matter. The doctors on *Emancipator* had to amputate his leg." Wedge winced, but Ackbar went on, "He'll be fitted with a prosthetic, but we can't say for certain that his reflexes will be as good as they initially were. He'll have to undergo months of therapy before we know for sure. There are also... political implications in this."

"What did his aunt say?"

"She raised... private concerns to me. Hers, and those of the boy's father. They were never comfortable with the idea of young Beruss flying combat missions. She also questioned the wisdom of letting two combat pilots in the same unit form romantic attachments."

Wedge had had the same doubts when it had first become clear that Avan and Feylis were involved, but there was no regulation against intra-squad romantic pairings; furthermore, he'd been happy for them and hadn't wanted to spoil it. Looking back now, it seemed like another failure.

"Avan was a good pilot," Wedge said, "But he was never... Well, he was never a natural."

"Never one of your best."

Wedge nodded. He didn't want to sound cruel.

Ackbar sighed and said, "Commander Antilles, it should noted that, without Celchu, Beruss, or Fel, Rouge Squadron is down to half a full roster. If it's going to fly again it's going to need substantial rebuilding."

Wedge heard the stress on that *if*. He was ready, then, when Ackbar said, "I've made the decision to disband Rouge Squadron. Rest assured, your pilots will land on their feet. I know Lieutenants Janson and Klivian already have outstanding offers to lead training units."

Wedge blinked. Janson and Hobbie hadn't mentioned anything of the kind. But then, they wouldn't have.

"Admiral, sir... I'm glad you're taking care of my people. But I have to ask. What about me?"

Ackbar considered him with those large, unreadable eyes. "I'm not certain yet, Commander, but some one is going to have to rebuild Rogue Squadron one day. Since General Skywalker has already resigned his commission, that leaves you as the most senior Rogue left."

Wedge stared, dumbfounded. "Sir... Our conversation, when you asked me to let Tycho fly..."

"I meant what I said."

"Exactly. I chose my family over the Republic. Sir, I don't deserve my uniform."

Ackbar took a deep, deep breath. "The events at Orron III are going to remain highly classified. Cracken is still investigating things you reported, including Leonia Tavira's return. He's also trying to find out what happened to Captain Celchu. But for now, the actions you took there must also be kept secret."

"I know that, sir... But I'm a *deserter*."

"I know. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't shake my trust in you." Wedge lowered his head. The admiral went on, "That is why, for the foreseeable future, we'll be working closely together. You'll be serving me in a role of strategic advisor while we lay down a battle plan for an invasion of the Core."

"But sir, after what we lost at Etti IV..."

"Isard had lost more, including her best ship and her best commanders. This war doesn't wait for us to sort out our personal problems."

Wedge knew that all too well. He thought over his new assignment and said, "It sounds like you're trying to keep me away from a cockpit."

Ackbar didn't deny it. "Until I know I can trust you again, yes. Until then, you stay by my side."

"This is better than I deserve." He looked down, ashamed.

"You'll have to learn to live with that. And when I decide to trust you again, we'll rebuild Rogue Squadron. Together."

That *when* echoed in Wedge's thoughts after he left Ackbar's office and walked down to *Home One*'s main hangar bay. He found what was left of Rouge Squadron

down there, docked against the far wall. It was down to five X-wings now, and it would soon be none. Now that he'd been pulled off active flight duty, he wondered what would happen to his personal X-wing, the one with Death Star kill markers. It was something he'd never had to wonder about before.

After that he wandered to the squadron's locker room. When he stepped inside he was surprised to find Winter sitting on the bench in front of the open door to Tycho's locker; Leia stood over her shoulder. Both looked up to meet him and he froze in place. He felt ashamed to be seen by either of them.

Leia, though, went right to him and put her arms around his shoulders.

"Oh, Wedge," she said, "It's so good to see you."

"Leia, I'm so sorry," he breathed against her shoulder.

"Sorry for what?" she pulled back to look at him.

"At Etti IV, I left. I chased Fel and—" he stopped, shook his head. Leia stared at him quizzically. He realized that she hadn't heard a thing.

"You know that Fel is gone, don't you?"

She nodded grimly. "I heard Isard got him."

"I think so. What happened... Well, it's a long story. And very classified."

"I understand, Wedge."

She couldn't. She had no idea what he'd been through on Orron III; what he'd recovered for a few brief minutes and lost all over again. He put both hands on her shoulders and said, "Leia... I had to make a choice. The kind of choice we talked about earlier, do you remember?"

Her eyes went soft, her voice quiet. "I do."

"I made my choice. And it didn't matter." He laughed, dry and bitter. "None of it mattered. They're all gone."

She cupped his hand with a soft palm and looked into his eyes. Understanding passed without words. She nodded slowly, sadly.

They stepped apart. Finally, Wedge forced himself to look at Winter. He saw that she had Tycho's dress uniform folded on her lap; in her hand, she held a battered crest with the Empire's circular logo on it. Wedge recognized it as the

badge they handed out to pilots after graduating the Imperial flight academy.

"He wanted to remember," said Winter, and Wedge knew she forgot nothing; not Alderaan, not Tycho, nothing. "Just like he still remembered Nyiestra, and his family... It was important to him, remembering."

"Cracken's doing everything he can to find Tycho," Wedge said weakly. "For all we know, he might even be with Fel."

She looked up at Wedge and their eyes met; both immediately looked away. Wedge wouldn't blame her if she held him responsible for what happened to Tycho. He'd never know for sure if she did. If he asked, she'd deny it, and if she said no, he wouldn't believe her. He didn't believe it himself.

He wondered if they'd ever be able to look each other in the eye again.

"He remembered," she said as she looked back at the old academy crest. "Everything he'd done, good and bad. Everything he'd lost. All the mistakes he'd made. He never wanted to forget any of that."

The room dropped into grim silence. Softly, Leia asked, "Why?"

"Because something always comes next. Something always changes. You remember, and you keep moving. That's what Tycho did. It's what we all do, whether you want to or not. Remember. And keep moving."

"We don't know if he's..." Wedge began, but couldn't say the last word. For a moment he was struck dizzy by everything that had happened to him: how close he'd come to gaining what he'd never dared hope for, only to lose more than he'd ever imagined.

Finally, he croaked, "We don't know what happened to him."

Winter picked up Tycho's uniform, held it to her face, and breathed deep. Wedge saw the glint of tears run down her cheeks to darken the fabric. He had to look away.

CORUSCANT

When his captors let go of him, Tycho Celchu was dropped hard onto the tile floor. He broke his fall with his palms but couldn't lift his head. Pain shot up through his kneecaps, but it gave him the focus he needed to break through the numbed drug-induced haze he'd been trapped in since his capture.

His eyes focused ahead of him. He saw the edges of two scarlet robes; then, in front of them, a pair of polished black calf-high boots, topped by scarlet trousers.

It couldn't be her. It couldn't be anyone else.

With effort, he raised his head and looked up at the scowling face of Ysanne Isard.

As her red-and-blue glare held his, she asked, "Do you feel lucky to be alive?"

Tycho opened his mouth but no sounds came. He tried to force words through but they came out as a hacking cough. Hands caught his shoulders and pulled him back so he knelt upright before Isard.

"Do you?" she asked again.

"Not particularly," Words felt like knives in his throat.

"As well you shouldn't. Do you have idea what has happened to your Rebel Alliance since you've been away?"

He shook his head.

"We traced two of your Rebel leaders, Borsk Fey'lya and Leia Organa, to a secret meeting with Corporate Sector officials on Etti IV." Tycho's heart sank as she continued, "Grand Admirals Makati and Grant trapped them there. Your rebel fleet put up a fight, so Grant was forced to open fire on the planet's surface using the full power of our new super star destroyer *Vengeance*. After that, the rest of the fleet was annihilated as well. Needless to say, there were no survivors."

Her words meant the death of everything he cared about: of Wedge and Hobbie and Janson and the Rouges, of Leia and Winter, of the New Republic itself. It was awful beyond words.

But when he looked up at Isard, she was still scowling.

"Liar," he said.

Her scowl deepened. "Excuse me?"

"You're wrong. You're lying. You're trying to trick me."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because," he tried to smile. "Lies are all you do."

Her foot snapped up before he could react. Instead of catching him in the face or the chin, her boot-tip stabbed into his right shoulder. He cried out, but the unseen guards held his shoulders and kept him from falling.

As he winced so hard it brought tears to his eyes, Isard continued, "What do you think *really* happened? Please, I'm curious."

"Well," he panted, "You seem pretty mad... So I'm guessing... We killed a grand admiral?"

"Pull him up," Isard ordered, and Tycho's captors hoisted him upright. His legs were still too wobbly to stand so he dangled between them helplessly as Isard took a step closer.

"Well?" Tycho asked, struggling to meet her eyes. "Who was it? Did we get Makati?"

She reached out and squeezed his chin between the fingers of her black-gloved hand. She squeezed so hard it hurt but Tycho managed to say, "We did it, didn't we? We really... outfought him..."

"Makati was not beaten," she said. "He was murdered by rebel assassins."

The news almost made him giddy. "Good enough for me."

She released his chin, formed her hand into a fist, and punched him in the stomach. Tycho sagged in his captors' arms and gasped for breath.

"Do not be too happy with your victory," Isard warned. "You should know that the two rebel spies you met with, Marya and Shome, have been captured by my agents."

Suddenly Tycho didn't feel giddy at all. He sagged lower and prayed a silent prayer that somehow, one of their packets of information had gotten back to General Cracken; for the sake of the war effort, for the sake of his best friend.

"I've taken them to a special facility of mine," Isard went on. "It's where I put my... special cases. They'll soon be joined by a very important person. The Prex- I should say *former*- Prex of the Corporate Sector Authority. I'm eager to see what secrets the Rebels told him before his capture."

Tycho said nothing. He'd been wondering how long poor Marya and Shome would last in Isard's dungeons. The bit about the Prex- he wasn't sure what to make of it. More mind games, probably. Or maybe she really had captured the officials Leia and Winter had gone to meet, and that might mean-

Tycho couldn't let himself think it. He had to assume everything Isard said was a lie. He had to trust that the war was still going on, that Wedge and Winter and everyone he cared about were safe.

It was the only way he'd die a sane man.

Isard grabbed him by the hair; he yelped as she tugged his head upright. She looked down at him with that same scowl and said, "You will be joining them too, Captain Celchu. Yes, I think you'll make a very fine addition to my Lusankya..."

The name meant nothing to him. Everything she'd said rattled in his drug-addled brain and one thing stood out, not because she'd said it, but because she hadn't.

Through bared teeth, Tycho wheezed, "Baron Fel... you lost him... didn't you?"

She punched him, hard. Pain tore across his right cheek. She brought up a knee, right into his diaphragm. As he sputtered and tried to breathe she hit him a third time, right in the jaw. Teeth split open his lower lip and blood rolled down his chin. He tried to focus his eyes even as his head felt like it was going to split apart.

"Take him to Lusankya," he heard Isard declare. He felt his captors pull him away, felt the floor move beneath his feet.

The pain threatened to overwhelm him, but he clung to the pain, held it to his heart. Pain told him that Fel had escaped, that Makati was dead, that Winter and Leia and Wedge and everyone else was safe.

As they dragged Tycho into the dark, pain was the only hope he had.

ADMONITOR

After their escape from Orron III, it was a long way home.

First, their shuttle rendezvoused with the interdicator cruiser *Corvus*, which had already packed itself full with refugees from the destroyer *Grey Wolf*. Next, they swung around the Outer Rim to an obscure, polluted planet Soontir Fel had never heard of. The Noghri commandos who'd been accompanying Thrawn left there, and though Fel wasn't privy to their leavetaking, he had the sense it was to be temporary rather than permanent.

After that, they began the long journey to the Unknown Regions. Fel had a lot of time to talk with his wife, with the stormtroopers who'd rescued him, and with the men and women, human and aliens, who'd been working together to crew *Corvus* and *Grey Wolf*.

By the time they rendezvoused with the star destroyer *Admonitor*, Fel had a good idea how of his conversation with Thrawn was going to go. He was taken to the grand admiral's personal chamber on the destroyer; the alien sat in a dark room, lit only by the glowing pinpoints of starlight on a map. Fel couldn't recognize the star systems from their pattern, and knew it had to be somewhere in their destination, in what he'd always called the Unknown Regions.

Thrawn began by saying, "I want you to know that I allow few people in these chambers. Captain Parck, whom you've just met, is one. So was Dagon Niriz."

He'd heard that name already. "The captain of *Grey Wolf*."

"Niriz was a loyal soldier of the Empire. On his first mission under my command he almost attempted mutiny." Despite his words, his voice sounded wistful, faintly nostalgic. "Naturally, his opinions evolved in time. Others, such as Daric LaRone and his men, were more like you. They'd already fallen out with the Empire as they knew it and were searching for something else to serve."

"I see," Fel said, then added, "I appreciate your trust. I'm not sure what I've done to earn it. Frankly, admiral, I'm not sure what I've done to deserve any of this. What your men sacrificed, just to rescue me and me wife..." He closed his

eyes and saw the face of Daric LaRone as he stood resolute in the landing lights of the troop transport on Orron III. He could only take it for a second, then opened them again. "Admiral, I'm in your debt."

"I don't want to be in your debt. Do you now the kind of war I've been fighting in uncharted corners of the galaxy?"

"I've heard, sir."

"Then you know what kind of a battle is ahead of you. You should *want* to fight that battle."

He allowed himself to imagine his future: flying again, leading fighter wings again, engaging in ugly battles against hideous alien warlords to save alien populations he'd never heard of. He could imagine chaos upon chaos, battle after battle, without interludes of peace.

But his wife was by his side, finally, and soon he would have a child. Somehow, that made all the difference.

Fel examined his thoughts and chose his words carefully. "I think... What I've believed in, what I've wanted to fight for, that's never changed. I'm a soldier, and I've always been willing to fight for a cause. That's never changed either. I've just needed two things."

Thrawn raised an eyebrow, expectant.

"I need Syal by my side. And I need a cause I can really believe in, a cause that doesn't use soldiers like me as pawns and throw them away."

"You will get that in my service, Baron Fel. I promise."

"I want to believe you, sir."

"Then believe. See, listen, and judge for yourself."

He'd already seen a man he barely knew throw himself in front of a blaster-shot to save his life. He'd heard stories from *Grey Wolf's* surviving crew about brave Captain Niriz. No one had made them give their lives for the cause. They'd chosen to. That said everything.

"I think," Fel said, "I already know. And I can't say how much their sacrifices mean. I wish I could say I deserved it."

"You have much to be worthy of," Thrawn said, voice brittle with restrained grief. "

"Believe me, I know." Fel looked awkwardly at his boots, and when silence dragged he asked, "Shouldn't we be going, sir?"

Thrawn nodded and rose from his chair, and together they walked out of the chamber.

The remembrance ceremony on *Admonitor's* broad forward observation deck was crammed with people: many human, some blue-skinned aliens like Thrawn or green-skinned ones like Vaantaar, plus other races from planets Fel had never heard of.

He followed Thrawn to the front of the chamber, where Syal stood waiting alongside Brightwater, Marcross, Quiller, and Grave. She wore a blue robe that matches her eyes; her face was clean and bright and her short-cut hair was back to its natural gold.

He took her hand as they stood for the ceremony. It was briefer than he'd been expecting; Thrawn was apparently not one for speeches since he stood to the side and let Captain Parck make his own statement, which was also brief. He spoke of the courage of men who lived their lives in wartime, and the value of sacrifice. It was the kind of speech Fel had heard in years serving the Empire, and later the Republic, but somehow it felt different this time.

When Parck's short words were done, forty-seven cargo containers were jettisoned toward the nameless sun shining past the viewport. Fel knew many more had died aboard *Grey Wolf* whose bodies they'd been unable to recover. He also knew that somewhere, hopefully in the front row, was the body of Daric LaRone.

From Syal's other side he heard Brightwater whisper, very softly, "Clear sailing, Boss."

When the ceremony was done, beings began to file out. Parck stepped up to Fel and shook his hand, then did the same for Syal and the others. Thrawn remained where he was, back to the viewport, watching everyone else leave. His glowing eyes, alien and unreadable, met Fel's. His head inclined in a slight nod, and Fel nodded back. Then Syal took his arm and turned him away.

"Hey, Baron," said Brightwater, "We were going to do something special, something private for LaRone."

"I see." Fel had never gotten the impression that the four men blamed him for their leader's death, but he still felt uncomfortable around them.

Syal squeezed his arm and said, "I think we should go, Soontir."

"Listen to your woman, Baron," said Quiller. "She knows the score."

Fel shot his wife a questioning look; she returned with a tiny smile, one of the few he'd seen from since Orron III. They'd talked about finding some way to let Wedge know that they were both all right and not in Isard's clutches, but they also knew Thrawn's people would never allow contact with Republic forces, no matter how limited. They'd already sailed past charted space and the galaxy they'd known.

Syal showed regret about Wedge, but not about this new situation she'd ended up in. She'd lost her old life completely when Fel had defected; everything they had together now was a miracle, and they both knew it.

They were led to a small, simple ready-room. Grave reached up to the top shelf of a cupboard and brought down six glasses, while Brightwater went into another bin and pulled out a bottle of some blue ale.

"I don't suppose that's from a planet I've heard of," Fel deadpanned.

"Probably not," agreed Brightwater as he poured out the glasses.

"You should probably stick with five cups," Marcross said and nodded at Syal.

She cupped her stomach and said, "I can manage one sip. A small one, for LaRone."

"He'd like that. This was his favorite," said Marcross. They stood around the table and he lifted his glass for a toast. The other troopers did too, and then Syal. Fel felt his self-consciousness dissolve as he picked up his own and raised it to match theirs.

For a second nobody spoke. Glances passed around the table, and Fel realized nobody knew what to say.

He'd barely met LaRone. Even Syal had known him better. Still, words came to him, and he raised his cup a little higher. "I'm standing here today because of other peoples' sacrifices, people who didn't even now me and were just doing their duty. I can't say how humbling that is. I want to respect them. I *need* to respect them."

He hesitated, but when Syal squeezed his free hand he found more words. "I want to make a toast to Daric LaRone, Dagon Niriz, and many more I'll never hear of. To all the good soldiers."

They echoed his last words, even Syal. They tipped up their glasses and drank. It was like nothing Fel had ever tasted before, and whatever his expression was, it made Syal burst out laughing. She sagged against him as the others all started talking, and soon they were telling jokes and stories from all the missions they'd done together, but Fel barely heard them.

He put an arm across Syal's shoulder, rested his head against hers, and closed his eyes. He felt the warmth of his wife, the warmth of whatever he'd just drunk, the warmth of this boisterous room. And beyond that, he knew, was cold space and all those scattered stars, and a lifetime of battle upon battle waiting to be fought.

"But not today," he muttered, without prelude or explanation.

As always, Syal understood. She reached up to stroke his face and whispered, "No. Not today."

CODA: CRISIS OF FAITH

BY TIMOTHY ZAHN

The sky looked odd this morning, Trevik of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red thought as the Queen's entourage left the residence wing of the palace and began the short walk to the Dwelling of Guests. Perhaps it was clouds, he thought: clouds too high and too thin for his eyes to distinguish through the mists rising from the Dreaming Waters that lay to the north of the Red City.

But he'd seen the sky through thin clouds before. More likely it was something their guest had done, the chief of the thirty beings who had arrived a month ago, creatures with yellow eyes and hair the color of a storm cloud. Had their chief not said he would protect the Red City from the evil forces gathering among the stars over Quethold?

"Drink."

Quickly Trevik lifted the ornate bowl of nectar that he held clutched to his chest. The Queen leaned toward the bowl, her embroidered robes moving in time with the rhythmic swaying of her canopied litter, her long abdomen stretched out along the litter's couch.

"Higher," Borosiv of the Circling of the First of the Red growled tersely from his far less ornate litter behind the Queen's.

Wincing, Trevik stretched up his arms, raising the bowl as high as he could. The Queen drank deeply and then straightened up again, her mandibles shaking off the last drops of the rich liquid, her eyes flicking impassively across Trevik's face.

Trevik lowered the bowl again to his chest, feeling the thudding of his heart within his torso. Being selected to act

as the Queen's bowlcarrier was the highest honor any Midli could achieve. It was as if all the Midlis on Quethold stood behind him, just as all the Circlings stood behind Borosiv. The last thing in the world he wanted was to fail, and through that failure to bring shame to his family.

"Straighten up," Borosiv continued in the same low, grouchy voice. "Watch the Workers. Duplicate their stance."

Trevik swallowed, a quick flush of shame flickering across his heart. He'd been told all this earlier, of course, but in the heat of the moment he'd forgotten.

Now he looked over at line of Workers carrying the Queen's litter. There were eight of them, their torsos held nearly vertical despite the weight of the litter on their shoulders. Each Worker's abdomen stretched out behind him, perfectly level with the ground, with his four legs moving in precise lockstep rhythm.

Swallowing again, Trevik tried to match their stance and movement. The Queen, he'd heard, was willing to give a new bowlcarrier a certain degree of latitude on his first day. But that didn't mean he shouldn't try his very best.

Especially since Borosiv didn't seem inclined to give the new Midli any of that same slack.

The Dwelling of Guests was a circular building situated in the center of the courtyard. It was small, with only a modest central gathering area on the ground floor and ten small privacy rooms on the floor above. Two of the storm-haired aliens stood at the south entryway, their strange weapons held across their shoulders as they watched the Queen and her entourage approach.

It was the closest Trevik had ever been to these particular aliens, and he eyed them curiously as he and the litters drew near. They were upright beings, unlike the Quesoth but very similar to the Quesoth's allies, the Stromma. They had two legs, a torso with no separate abdomen, and a head topped with flowing black storm-cloud hair. Humanoid, he'd heard such beings called before.

But at least their eyes were proper, multifaceted like those of the Quesoth, though they were a bright yellow instead of Quesoth's pale blue. Perhaps their eyes were why the Queen

had chosen to defy Quethold's old alliance with the Stromma and accept the Storm-hairs into the Red City as her guests.

Or perhaps it was because of the weapons the Storm-hairs had brought with them. Weapons more compact and powerful even than those of the Stromma.

Trevik focused on the Storm-hairs' weapons, feeling himself suddenly tensing. Along with the twelve Workers carrying the litters, the Queen's entourage also included twelve Soldiers, and if the Storm-hairs neglected the proper greeting the Queen might well order the aliens to be disciplined. Trevik hadn't seen the Storm-hairs' weapons in action, but he'd heard enough stories to know that he didn't especially want to. Especially not at close range.

Fortunately, the Storm-hairs knew the correct protocol. "Hail, O Queen of the Red," one of them intoned as the litter came within the prescribed five paces. "We live to serve, and die to serve."

The Queen remained silent as the aliens pulled open the doors and the group filed through. Under the circumstances, Trevik decided, her silence was probably a good thing.

The chief of the Storm-hairs was waiting in the center of the gathering area. It was the first time Trevik had seen the area since the Queen had granted them the Dwelling, and he was struck by how alien it had become. Changes in furniture were understandable- after all, the Storm-hairs weren't built anything like the Quesoth.

But the Storm-hairs had gone far beyond simple comfort and convenience. They had redone the entire room, from the hangings on the walls to the meditation sculptures about the walkways. In fact, even the pattern of the walkways had been changed. It was as if the Dwelling had been transformed into a part of the Storm-hairs' own world.

"Drink."

Trevik lifted the bowl, his heart again beginning to pound. Some of the sculptures the Storm-hairs had removed had been from the Queen's own meditation room. Would she take offense that those treasures had been taken out of sight?

Perhaps she already had. Lifting her face from the nectar bowl, she raised her voice in the high-pitched ululations of Soldier Speak.

Trevik tensed. But the two lines of Soldiers flanking the two litters didn't surge toward the chief Storm-hair. The commander replied in the same language, and all of the Soldiers spread out across the room toward the Dwelling's outer doors. They passed through and disappeared into the courtyard, closing the doors behind them.

"Down," the Queen ordered.

Trevik took a step to the side as the eight Workers carrying the litter lowered it to the floor and then knelt and curled themselves over into the Worker sign of homage. Behind the Queen's litter, Trevik heard a softer swishing of cloth as the four Workers in the rear likewise lowered Borosiv's litter.

The chief Storm-hair bowed low, his posture almost a caricature of the Workers' stance. "Hail, O Queen of the Red," he said.

Trevik frowned. Was that it? Did he not also live to serve and die to serve, as did the Quesoth and even the other Storm-hairs?

"Drink."

Hurriedly Trevik stepped back to the litter and offered the bowl. Apparently, the chief Storm-hair had indeed finished his greeting. Even more amazing, the Queen didn't seem offended by the lack of a death-pledge. It was almost as if she saw him as an equal, the way Trevik would see his brothers of the Seventh as equals.

But that was insane. The Queen had no equals.

The Queen finished her drink and waved Trevik away. "The threat remains, O Nuso Esva," she said, addressing the chief Storm-hair. "My Circlings have seen the flying cities, black against the stars."

"The threat remains, O Queen," the chief Storm-hair- Nuso Esva- agreed. "Let us take further counsel together as to how we may deal with our common enemy."

"Let us speak to the destruction of Grand Admiral Thrawn."

The other five members of the strategy session were already waiting in the bridge conference room of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* when Senior Captain Voss Parck arrived. "My apologies, Admiral; gentles," he

said as he circled the table to the empty chair at Grand Admiral Thrawn's right. "There was a last-minute report from the Tantsor system that I thought might be relevant to our discussion."

"Was it?" Stromma Council Liaison Nyama asked, his grasslike fur glinting in the room's lights, his heavy brow ridges angled over his pure black eyes, his normally snide tone even more insolent than usual.

"Yes," Parck said, long practice enabling him not to take offense at Nyama's manner. Loud belligerence was a universal- and highly prized- quality among the Stromma hierarchy, and the species' military professionals were no exception. "The rumored activity turned out to be nothing but a small smuggling group. The searchers found no connection between them and Nuso Esva, and no trace of actual warships."

"And in your vision this waste of effort constitutes 'progress'?" Nyama scoffed.

"What Council Liaison Nyama means to ask," a younger Stromma at Nyama's side said in a more polite tone, "is whether clearing one system genuinely narrows the search for Nuso Esva's remaining forces, especially when so many other possibilities remain."

"Even negative information is useful," Thrawn said calmly, his glowing red eyes focused on Nyama. "Particularly since the probe droids we're leaving behind after each search ensure that Nuso Esva's forces don't move in behind us."

Nyama gave a throaty snort. "We 'know' where he is," he said, jabbing a finger emphatically downward. "What do we care where his scattered remnant cowers?"

"Because as long as he lives, they remain a threat," Parck said. "You of all people should have learned that, Council Liaison. You were winning in the struggle against those forces until he returned to take personal command."

"The situation there was vastly different," Nyama growled. "The forces on Oristrom were well supplied and well entrenched. And there were a great deal more of them. Besides, Nuso Esva isn't going to be leaving Quethold. Not anymore. Certainly not alive."

"Liaison Nyama makes a valid point," Stormtrooper Commander Balkin said from the other end of the table. "Wherever his remnant is hiding, Nuso Esva surely has insufficient ships to break through our blockade."

"Agreed, Commander," Thrawn said. "Unfortunately, the blockade will very soon have to be lifted. There are other matters that urgently require my attention, other threats to this region and to those who have joined the Empire of the Hand."

"The admiral is correct," Parck seconded. "I can name at least ten such threats right now, and there will be more to come."

"Then make an end of him," Balkin said firmly. "The stormtroopers of the 501st stand ready to move in and bring you his head."

Nyama snorted again. "You have no idea what you're saying," he said scornfully. "You've never faced Quesoth Soldiers in battle. We, on the other hand, have dealt with them both as allies and as enemies. They're bigger even than the Workers- when they rear up they're nearly as tall as you or I- and immensely strong. They're also fiercely loyal to their Queen, obeying her orders unquestioningly and with no consideration for their own safety. And there are thousands of them within the Red City."

"We've faced loyal and numerous enemies before," Balkin said. "These will fall just as thoroughly."

"But at a severe cost," Nyama warned. "Are you ready to accept such losses, Grand Admiral Thrawn?"

"I don't accept unnecessary losses of any sort, Council Liaison," Thrawn said, his blue-skinned face impassive. "But I was unaware that you once fought against the Quesoth."

"It was long ago, during the foolish arrogance we called our Expansion Period," Nyama said. For once, Parck noted with interest, the belligerent voice was almost introspective. "Even with the primitive ceremonial weapons they still use, we suffered greatly before we came to our senses and made peace with them." His nostrils flared. "As will you if you continue this path of foolishness."

"Perhaps someone on the council can talk to the Queen," Parck suggested. "If you could get her to see reason..."

"Queens of Quesoth make their own reason," Nyama said. "Whatever her logic for accepting Nuso Esva into her care, she will not be moved from it."

"Then she will suffer," Thrawn warned.

"We all suffer," Nyama said flatly. "Such is the way of life."

Parck grimaced. The Quesoth would suffer, all right, like the twenty and more species that had already suffered under Nuso Esva's reign of terror. Ever since the alien and his people- the warriors he proudly called his "Chosen"-had emerged from a still-unidentified planet in the Unknown Regions, they'd been cutting a deadly swath through peoples, worlds, and even small federations. Of all those attacked, only Thrawn had shown the skill and resolve necessary to block Nuso Esva's expansion and, eventually, to begin driving him back.

But victory had come with a terrible cost. The Chosen fought with fanatical zeal and forced their subjugated peoples to fight alongside them with the same stubbornness.

Even worse, with every forced retreat the Chosen followed Nuso Esva's scorched-ground policy of destroying everything they couldn't take with them, not just weapons of war but also the means for the local populace to survive through the next winter or dry spell. Millions had died in Nuso Esva's conquests, and millions more in the aftermath of his retreats.

Including hundreds of thousands of Stromma who'd been caught in the crossfire and scorched ground when Thrawn finally succeeded in pushing Nuso Esva off their worlds. Which, for Parck, made Nyama's attitude that much more bewildering. Didn't he want to see his professed allies the Quesoth freed from Nuso Esva's bondage?

"Yet our job as civilized beings is to minimize that suffering as best we can," Thrawn said. If he was bothered by Nyama's apparent lack of compassion, it didn't show in his expression or voice. "I'd like to see the records of your wars against the Quesoth. With an insectoid species, even long-past battles may give us insight."

"Those records are old and fragmentary," Nyama said. "They would also be useless. Right now, it is Nuso Esva's strategy and tactics that they will use."

"He'll indeed be devising their overall strategy," Thrawn said, his tone thoughtful. "But as Quesoth Soldiers still use their ancient weapons, so may they also still hold to their ancient battlefield tactics."

Beside Balkin, TIE Squadron Commander Baron Soontir Fel stirred in his chair. "Those umbrella shields they've got over the central part of the city are hardly ancient weapons," he pointed out.

"True," Thrawn conceded. "Liaison Nyama may be right. We may indeed face a conflating of disparate tactics, a mixture that will be difficult to anticipate." He looked at Parck. "We need information, Captain. More information; better information. We're working blind."

"How quickly the indomitable Master Warrior stumbles," Nyama said sarcastically.

"What Council Liaison Nyama means..." - the young conciliator spoke up again - "is that timely information is of course a necessary part of combat preparation." His eyes flicked briefly to Nyama. "He also suggests that there may be a way to obtain the information you seek."

Thrawn's eyes narrowed slightly. "Continue."

Nyama grimaced. "As I've already said, we've been allies with Quethold for many generations. As a result, we have contacts among the Quesoth of the Red. Perhaps I can speak to one of them for you."

"You already said they were unquestioningly loyal to their Queen," Balkin reminded him. "What good would talking to them do?"

"I said the *'Soldiers* were loyal," Nyama shot back. "The Soldiers and Workers are barely even intelligent, let alone able to make their own decisions. I never said that was the case with the Circlings and Midlis."

"But they're still loyal, aren't they?" Balkin persisted.

"I said they can think for themselves," Nyama all but bellowed. "Are you deaf, you bald-skinned..."

"What Council Liaison Nyama means," the conciliator interrupted hurriedly, "is that there's a small but growing opposition to the Queen of the Red's alliance with Nuso Esva. If we can contact them, perhaps they can obtain the information you seek."

Nyama glared at the conciliator, but gave a reluctant nod. "Provided you want something within their capabilities," he growled.

"What are their capabilities?" Fel asked.

"Not much," Nyama said. "Circlings are the Queen's advisers and upper-tier breeders. They're the most intelligent Quesoth, but they deal in words and thoughts, not actions. Midlis are tasked with overseeing the Workers, so they're not that intelligent. But they can be reasoned with, and can handle equipment to a limited extent."

"The task should be easy enough," Thrawn assured him. "All I want is for one of them to smuggle a holocam into Nuso Esva's chambers."

"A holocam?" - Nyama echoed disbelievingly.

"Nuso Esva had little of his own artwork with him when he fled to Quethold," Thrawn explained. "Most of what he has will be from the Queen's collection. I need to see which pieces he's chosen."

Nyama snorted and shook his head. "Your obsession with art, Grand Admiral Thrawn, is more unsettling than your obsession with Nuso Esva himself."

"His obsession with both is what drove Nuso Esva off Oristrom and gave you the freedom to be here today," Fel said.

Nyama glared at him. But he had no answer, and everyone in the room knew it. "You have this holocam with you?" he growled, turning back to Thrawn.

"It will be ready whenever you confirm that one of the disaffected Circlings or Midlis can get it into Nuso Esva's chambers," Thrawn said.

"And can then bring it out again, I suppose," Nyama growled. He stood up abruptly. "I return now to my ship and will attempt to communicate with the dissidents. How large will this holocam be?"

"Very small," Thrawn said, holding up his hand. "The size of one joint of my finger. We can disguise it in any way necessary to facilitate entry."

"Perhaps it could even be planted on one of the Workers or Soldiers who attend the Queen," Parck suggested. "I

understand twelve of each accompany her wherever she goes."

"You understand correctly," Nyama said. "I'll inquire as to the best way to achieve this goal, and will communicate with you when I have more to say."

With a brisk nod to Thrawn, he turned and strode from the room, the young conciliator hurrying to keep up. The door slid shut behind them, and Thrawn looked around the table. "Comments?" he invited.

"It could work," Parck said cautiously. "The number of variables is still uncomfortably high, though."

"And if Nyama is typical of Stromma attitude," Fel added, "we'd better assume we'll be tackling Nuso Esva without them."

"They are allies with the Quesoth, after all," Balkin murmured. "It's not easy to make a stand against friends."

"Especially when they figure they can just stall down the chrono," Fel said. "Two years, isn't it, until Nuso Esva's time in Red City runs out?"

"Yes, if Nyama's numbers are accurate," Parck confirmed.

"His numbers are accurate, but his reasoning is flawed," Thrawn said. "Nuso Esva could do an enormous amount of damage to the people of the Red City in those two years. That's not a result I'm prepared to accept." He hesitated. "Bear in mind, too, that Liaison Nyama speaks for the Stromma council, and some of those members still blame us for the destruction their worlds suffered."

Fel muttered something under his breath. "I suppose they also blame their surgeons for damaging bits of good tissue when they're cutting out the poisoned rot?"

"I don't defend their opinions," Thrawn said mildly. "I merely state that those opinions exist. At any rate, we cannot allow the common people of the galaxy to suffer merely because their leaders sometimes refuse to face the universe's realities."

"Well, the reality here is that we can finally nail this son of a- that we can nail Nuso Esva," Fel amended hastily. "We've got him pinned, and there's no place he can run. And we understand how he works."

"True." Thrawn smiled faintly. "More important, he understands how I work."

"Hopefully, that will be enough," Parck said.

Thrawn inclined his head. "We shall see."

The sky still looked odd as Trevik left the palace at the half-darklight hour and set off down the gentle slope of the city hill and across the wide ring of Circling homes. Farther downslope, beyond the Circling ring, was the Midli area of the city where his own home was located.

The sky looked even stranger over the Circling area, he noted with interest as he walked. In places, it held the same strangely muted appearance as it did over the palace grounds. But in other, small places, the sky was as bright and blue as normal. He gazed at the wonder as he traveled, trying to figure out what it all meant.

Perhaps one of the Workers would know. They were the ones who built everything in the Red City. Trevik's brother Jirvin was overseer of one of the Worker groups that created and serviced the city's lighting equipment. Perhaps he would know what had happened to the sky.

A whiff of air stirred from beside him, bringing with it the scent of a Circling. Automatically, Trevik stepped to the side, out of the other's path. A hand closed around his arm.

"Walk," the Circling ordered quietly, steering Trevik off onto a different angle.

"Where do we go?" Trevik asked, fighting to keep up with the other's longer stride. "My home is in a different..."

"Walk in silence," the Circling said cutting him off.

They were well within the Midli circle when Trevik noticed that the sky had changed again. Now the areas of strangeness had become a patchwork of distinct circles, their edges almost touching, with proper sky in the gaps between them. Beyond the Midli area, Trevik could see that the strangeness ended completely across the wide expanse of Worker and Soldier homes.

He was still wondering at the sight when the Circling guided him to one of the Midli homes. The door opened as they approached, and with the Circling still urging him forward, Trevik stepped beneath the lintel.

There were three other Midlis awaiting them in the house's sharing room. Two were strangers; the third- Trevik gasped.

"Jirvin?"

"Hello, my brother," Jirvin of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red greeted him, his voice solemn. "Please forgive the manner of your coming. It was vital that we speak to you immediately."

"You could have simply called me on the farspeak when I reached my house," Trevik said.

"It was equally vital that we speak to you in a manner that the Storm-hairs could not overhear. Please; seat yourself."

For a long moment, Trevik thought about turning and walking out. But the Circling who had brought him here had planted himself beneath the lintel. With an unpleasant sensation twitching up his legs, Trevik slowly crossed to one of the couches and lowered himself gingerly onto it. "What is it you wish to say?" he asked.

He saw Jirvin brace himself. "We believe, my brother, that the Red City stands on the brink of destruction," he said. "We believe that the Queen of the Red has been led by deceit into allying herself with Nuso Esva."

"Impossible." The word burst from Trevik's mouth without conscious thought. "The Queen is all-knowing and capable of infinite depth of thought. No alien being could sway her mind to such an extent."

"Nevertheless, we believe that such has indeed occurred," Jirvin said. "We further believe that something must be done to prevent the imminent destruction of our city. Perhaps even our entire world."

Trevik stared at him. "What exactly are you saying, my brother?" he asked carefully.

"I'm saying that the being Thrawn of the First of the Chiss of the Empire of the Hand is not the great enemy that Nuso Esva has named him," Jirvin said. "We have spoken to one of the Stromma, who has revealed to us the true natures of Thrawn and Nuso Esva."

"And?"

"And we..." Jirvin waved a hand to encompass the entire sharing room "Have thus chosen to join ourselves with our Stromma friends. With them, and with Thrawn."

Furtively, Trevik looked again at the doorway. But the Circling was still standing beneath the lintel, blocking any chance of easy escape. "Why are you telling me all this?" he asked, turning back to his brother.

"Thrawn urgently needs information if we are to defeat Nuso Esva and free our Queen from his grasp," Jirvin said. "You, my brother, are the only one who can obtain that information."

"Impossible," Trevik repeated, the word again escaping his mouth without thought. "I'm a loyal Midli. More than that, I'm the Queen's own bowlcarrier."

"You've been bowlcarrier for a single day," one of the other Midlis scoffed. "Don't make it sound as if your entire past and family honor are at risk."

"My past may not be at risk, but my family honor surely is," Trevik insisted. "Regardless, I cannot betray my Queen in such a way."

"She is no longer your Queen," the Circling at the door rumbled. "She has become merely a hand tool of Nuso Esva."

"I cannot and will not believe that," Trevik shot back. "The Queen seeks only what is best for her people, and for all the people of Quethold." He leveled two fingers at the Circling. "It is this Thrawn who is the enemy. I have heard Nuso Esva say so."

"Have you heard the Queen herself say so?" Jirvin asked.

Trevik turned back to him, a quick and scathing response boiling up from within him.

Then he paused, the words unspoken. Had the Queen actually said such words in his presence? Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember her doing so. "It doesn't matter," he said stubbornly. "Nuso Esva is here, and he is the Queen's guest."

"He is her captor, not her guest," the Circling said. "You would serve the Queen better by allying yourself with us than by standing idly by as he exploits her."

"You've offered no proof of that," Trevik insisted.

"You've offered no proof to the contrary."

Trevik hissed. "Your challenge is useless. How does one prove a negative?"

"By taking the holocam our Stromma friends have given us," Jirvin said, his voice low and earnest. "By taking pictures of the Queen, and of Nuso Esva, and of the artwork with which he has decorated the Dwelling of Guests, so that we may learn the truth."

Trevik blinked. "The artwork?"

"Thrawn is able to read the hidden hearts of people through their choice of artwork," Jirvin said. "Or so the Stromma claims."

"The pictures will also prove that the Queen is with Nuso Esva of her own free will," the Circling added. "If, indeed, she is."

"If she allies herself freely with him, then we shall cease our efforts here," Jirvin assured Trevik. "Like you, my brother, we seek only what is best for our Queen, our city, and our world."

Trevik lowered his gaze to the floor. The Queen had accepted Nuso Esva as her guest- he was sure of it. But there was no way to prove that to Jirvin and the others except by doing what they asked. "Very well," he said, the words stinging his throat. "Where is this holocam?"

Jirvin rose from his couch and pulled a small, flat object from one of his vest pockets. "Here," he said, laying it across Trevik's hand.

Trevik frowned. The device was smaller than even the smallest of his fingers. "This is a cam?"

"It is," Jirvin confirmed. "You'll note it has the same texture and color pattern as your official bowlcarrier vest. Once secured there, it will be invisible to even the most strong-eyed observer."

He was right on that one, at least, Trevik had to admit. The cam would blend in perfectly. Whoever this Stromma was, he knew precisely how a bowlcarrier's vest looked. "How do I operate it?"

"You touch the upper right corner as you arrive at the Dwelling of Guests," Jirvin said. "The cam itself will do the rest."

"And make certain that it faces each piece of Nuso Esva's artwork during the time you're in the dwelling," the Circling added.

"I will." Trevik drew himself up. "And I will bring proof that the Queen has indeed chosen Nuso Esva as our ally. Then will you cease this foolishness?"

"If you bring back such proof, we will cease," Jirvin promised. "But if the proof is of her captivity under Nuso Esva's strength of mind, then our opposition to his presence will continue."

Trevik grimaced. How does one prove a negative? But it was clear that this was the best he was going to get. "I will bring the cam back at this hour tomorrow," he said, rising from the couch. "And then you will cease."

"Agreed," the Circling said, finally stepping away from beneath the lintel. "Farewell. May you eat and sleep deeply."

"May you eat and sleep deeply," Trevik replied with a sinking heart.

A minute later he was once again walking beneath the strange sky, heading toward his home. Surely he was right. Surely the Queen had chosen Nuso Esva as her ally of her own free will and depth of thought.

But if she hadn't, what did that mean for her? What would it mean for the rest of the Quesoth?

More immediately, what would it mean to Trevik if he was caught spying for Thrawn?

He had no way of knowing. But he was certain that it would not be pleasant.

Trevik slept poorly that night, and his food was equally unsatisfying. He woke early, groomed himself with extra care, and made certain he was at the palace a few minutes earlier than required. The nectar bowl was waiting for him beside the Queen's litter in the welcoming chamber, along with the Workers who would carry the two litters and half of the Soldiers who would escort them. Borosiv arrived a few minutes later and without a word took his place on the smaller litter.

His timing was perfect, as was only proper for the Circling who was the chosen attendant to the Queen. Barely a minute after Borosiv had settled into place, the inner doors opened and the Queen strode into the welcoming chamber, flanked by the other six Soldiers of their guard. She climbed up onto

her couch, and the Workers hoisted both litters to their shoulders.

And with Trevik trying not to look as nervous as he felt, the group headed out the door and across the courtyard to the Dwelling of Guests.

After all of the evening's worry and the night's fitful sleep, the day turned out to be a welcome anticlimax. No one spotted the cam, nestled into the pattern on Trevik's vest, and it was easier than he'd expected to surreptitiously take the pictures that Jirvin wanted. By the time the Queen recalled her Soldiers from their defensive ring outside the Dwelling and the group returned to the palace for her midday meal, he had managed to face the holocam toward every one of Nuso Esva's chosen artworks. After the meal, when they had returned to the Dwelling for more talk with Nuso Esva, he made sure to take a few more pictures.

There was one other big difference between Trevik's first and second days as the Queen's bowlcarrier. The day before, his mind had been fully occupied with keeping himself motionless and the bowl level. Today, after all those strange things Jirvin had said, he made an effort to listen to the conversation.

It was confusing. That didn't surprise Trevik- this was the Queen of the Red, after all, along with an alien she found intelligent enough to spend hours conversing with. Their talk was probably above even the wisdom and intelligence of a Circling, let alone a mere Midli like himself.

But the parts he did understand were disturbing. There was talk of shuttles, and of the building of fighter aircraft, and of weapons that were either hidden or soon would be. There was talk of umbrella shields, and traps, and more hidden weapons.

And there was a great deal of talk about death.

But none of that was important. What mattered was that the Queen was clearly not a prisoner of Nuso Esva and the rest of the Storm-hairs.

Later that evening, as he returned the cam to Jirvin, he told his brother exactly that. Jirvin said nothing, except to reaffirm his promise that he and the others would end their

opposition to the Queen if the record bore out Trevik's own observations. His unexpected and unwanted mission finally ended, Trevik again made his way home.

And that night, he did eat and sleep deeply.

The recorder erupted with a bewildering cacophony of squeaks, clicks, and squealings.

"Go through the Dwelling doors," Nyama translated, his ears twitching with concentration as he listened to the recording their Circling contact had delivered an hour ago. "Surround and protect the Guests."

There was another squeal.

"We obey the Queen," Nyama translated. There was a faint scuffling of feet, then the sound of opening and closing doors. "And they're gone," Nyama added, leaning back in his seat. "Everything else from now on should be in Quesoth Common Speak. Which I presume you understand."

"We do," Parck said, looking at Thrawn at the head of the conference table. The Grand Admiral's glowing eyes were narrowed, his full attention apparently on the photos of the Dwelling of Guests artwork that the secret recorder had also provided.

"What do you know about Soldier Speak, Liaison Nyama?" Parck asked as he keyed for a quick-search of the audio track.

The Stromma gave a snort. "Obviously, I can understand it," he said. "What else is there to know?"

"What Council Liaison Nyama means," the conciliator put in, "is that there is nothing more that anyone except a Quesoth Queen and Soldier can know. It is a highly secret language."

"Yet you know it," Parck pointed out. "So do several of our Stromma recruits."

"Including two of my stormtroopers," Balkin said.

"And will understanding gain you anything?" Nyama shot back. "I tell you right now that it will not. We've fought the Quesoth, Captain Parck. All that an understanding of Soldier Speak will gain you is the brief advantage of knowing which of your troops will be the next to die."

"Which can also be useful," Thrawn said, looking up from his datapad. "More important, understanding a language is the first step toward speaking or otherwise reproducing it."

"No," Nyama said flatly. "There's no reproducing of Soldier Speak. Believe me, Admiral Thrawn, we tried."

"That was a long time ago," Thrawn reminded him. "We have resources that weren't available to you back then."

"There's no reproducing of Soldier Speak," Nyama repeated, his tone sharper this time. "Queens have a unique set of vocal cords and resonance cavities, which even Soldiers themselves don't have. Besides that, Soldier language utilizes at least five different resonances and pitch variants, not to mention an entirely different vocabulary from Common Speak. The fourteen loud-speakers they've set up beneath the umbrella shield zone have to be specially designed to handle that entire range."

"So they don't use comlinks in battle?" Fel asked.

"Weren't you listening?" Nyama ground out. "I said they needed special loudspeakers. No comlink ever built can even come close to handling the necessary frequency range. Their speakers are simply too small."

"Yes, we heard you," Fel said. "So if we can knock out the loudspeakers, we'll cut off all communication between the Queen and her troops."

"For all the gain that will bring you," Nyama said contemptuously. "They'll just continue to follow their previous orders. Most likely something simple like 'Kill all the attackers.'"

"There may be other ways to exploit that sort of communications system," Thrawn said.

Nyama snorted. "If you think that..."

"Wait- here comes more Soldier Speak," Parck interrupted as the computer caught the language keys. He turned up the volume, wincing as the squealing sounds again assaulted his ears.

The monologue was short. "Liaison Nyama?" Parck invited.

"Nothing useful," Nyama said. "Soldiers: escort your Queen to the Palace."

"I thought all the Soldiers were outside," Fel said.

"There are air vents near the ceiling," Thrawn said, his eyes back on the pictures the holocam had taken. "They can hear her commands through those."

But now Parck could see that the tension lines in his commander's face had smoothed out. "You found something, Admiral?" he asked.

"I believe I may have found the solution," Thrawn said, laying the datapad aside. "From the artwork Nuso Esva has chosen to surround himself with, I anticipate he'll deploy most of his forces at the western edge of the city, clustered around Setting Sun Avenue."

Surreptitiously, Parck looked at Nyama. Thrawn's unique ability to read a species' deepest psychological core by studying its artwork was one of his greatest strengths, enabling him to anticipate his opponents' moves right down to their likely battlefield tactics. New allies seeing it demonstrated for the first time inevitably reacted with surprise, awe, or disbelief.

Nyama was apparently going for option three. "Brilliantly anticipated," the Stromma said sarcastically. "Of course he'll concentrate his forces there- that's the only spot on the perimeter where your juggernaut heavy tanks can enter the city. Everywhere else Nuso Esva's umbrella shields are angled at the edges to block vehicles of any size."

"Which suggests Setting Sun Avenue is the entrance to a trap," Balkin suggested.

"Indeed," Thrawn agreed calmly. "Because the area won't be guarded solely by Quesoth Soldiers. He'll also have a number of heavy-weapons emplacements concealed along the route, waiting for our juggernauts. As our forces enter the city, he'll angle the umbrella shields downward along the route, protecting the shields' generators from the juggernauts' fire, as well as preventing the tanks from straying off that path. Once the juggernauts have penetrated a predetermined distance into the city, he'll blast the first and last ones in line, thereby trapping all the others. At that point, he can destroy them at his leisure."

Parck nodded, a sour taste in his mouth. It was a tactic they'd seen Nuso Esva use to devastating effect in previous encounters against some of the Empire of the Hand's other allies. "So how do we counter it?" he asked.

"We first let him think his plan is working," Thrawn said. "That means sending the line of juggernauts in as he

expects." His eyes glittered. "But before he can launch his attack, we destroy the trap."

"Allow me to guess," Nyama growled. "Squadron Commander Fel and his oh-so-expert TIE pilots fly in through the gaps between the umbrella shields and blast the hidden guns."

"You scoff, but it's actually quite possible," Fel said. "The shields don't overlap nearly as well as they should. There are numerous gaps between them, including at least one along one of the steepest parts of the main city hill that's big enough to fly through if we come in at just the right angle. Once we're in and below the level of the shields, everything but the palace and palace grounds should be wide open to us."

"That assumes your pilots are able to insert at the necessary angle," Nyama countered. "In the heat and flurry of battle, such precision would be impossible."

Fel shrugged. "Impossible is Gray Squadron's specialty."

"And what of the laser cannons spread throughout the city?" Nyama persisted. "We gave them those cannons, Commander Fel, years before Nuso Esva's intrusion into this region. Each cannon is twin-barreled, with rapid-fire capabilities and enough power to take out one of your vaunted TIE fighters with a single shot. And they have massive forward shield plates, which makes them nearly impossible to destroy along their own fire-lines."

"But they have only manual targeting," Thrawn reminded them. "And the very shields that protect them also make them heavy and unwieldy. Even Nuso Esva's most expert gunners will have trouble with TIE attack speeds."

"Unless the TIE is coming straight at them, as is the case with Commander Fel's scenario," Nyama said acidly. "No, Admiral Thrawn. Trust me: your TIE fighters will be useless in this battle."

"Perhaps," Thrawn said. "We shall see."

"We shall see?" Nyama echoed. "Tell me, Admiral: if the *Admonitor's* turbolasers are incapable of penetrating the shields, your TIEs certainly won't be able to do so. What then will you have them do? Destroy the homes of the Workers and Soldiers that lie outside the shield zone?"

"We do not make war on civilians, Liaison Nyama," Thrawn said, his voice suddenly cold and brittle. "A fact you well know."

For a second Nyama's antagonism seemed to waver. Then, his natural Stromma leadership attitude reasserted itself. "Then what will they do?" he demanded.

"As Commander Fel has already stated, there are gaps between the shields," Thrawn said. "While the juggernauts move into the city, the TIEs will be shooting through those gaps with the goal of demolishing one or more of the shield generators."

"Generators that are protected by the very shields they create?" Nyama scoffed. "You can't hit the generators unless you're already beneath the shields."

"Unless it happens that a gap between two shields opens up a targeting vector to a third," Thrawn pointed out. "I admit the probability is low, but as Commander Fel pointed out, the coverage is not as good as it would have been if Nuso Esva had had more shields available. And if such an attack succeeds, the TIEs will be in position to take full advantage of the situation. But no, the downfall of Nuso Esva's plan will not be our TIE fighters, but our stormtroopers."

"Your stormtroopers?"

Across the table, Balkin stirred at the implied slight against his forces. Thrawn's hand twitched a warning, and the other subsided.

"Nuso Esva will have instructed the Queen to array the bulk of her Soldiers along Setting Sun Avenue to prevent a sortie from the juggernauts," the admiral said. "We'll therefore send a small stormtrooper force into the city southwest of the main assault, angle up toward the juggernaut line's southern flank, and attack the avenue's shield generators from behind."

Nyama shook his head. "Nuso Esva will not sit idly by and let that happen. Nor will the Queen of the Red. The Soldiers lining the attack route will simply turn around and swarm against the stormtroopers."

"Of course they will," Thrawn said. "When that happens, the stormtroopers will retreat, drawing them still farther from the juggernauts and the shields." He smiled slightly. "And

when they're too far back to respond, the stormtroopers inside the tanks will emerge, cut their way through the remaining Soldiers, and destroy the shields."

Nyama snorted. "And all this against Quesoth Soldiers? You have far too much confidence in your humans, Admiral Thrawn."

"The stormtroopers of the 501st consist of humans and nonhumans," Thrawn reminded him calmly. "Including a number of your own people."

"Not anymore." Abruptly, Nyama stood up. "I've heard enough. The Stromma council will not risk its warriors in this mad attack. Particularly not an attack against our allies. I hereby withdraw all of them from Imperial service, effective immediately."

Beside him, the conciliator's mouth dropped open in clear disbelief. "What Council Liaison Nyama means..."

"Council Liaison Nyama means exactly what he says," Nyama interrupted. "Give the orders, Admiral Thrawn. Or I will give them for you."

For a long moment, the room seemed to quiver with the silence of approaching death. Nyama loomed over the still-seated Thrawn like a grass-covered mountain, his black eyes hard, his mouth set at an angle that warned against argument.

Thrawn stirred. "Very well, Council Liaison," he said. "If you don't wish to assist in freeing your allies from bondage, your people will be ordered to your carriers."

"What I don't wish is for my people to die for nothing," Nyama ground out. "And it will be for nothing. In two years Nuso Esva and the remnant of his Chosen will find themselves masters of a deserted city. If at that time you still insist on having your vengeance, we will gladly march in alongside you and sing a song to your honor as you destroy him. But I won't waste my people in a useless and futile battle."

He glared at the conciliator, as if daring the younger Stromma to dare try to soften his words. But the conciliator had learned his lesson and remained silent.

"Nuso Esva can do a great deal of damage in those two years," Parck said. It wasn't a particularly politic thing to do, he knew, speaking words of contradiction to a Stromma

council liaison. But he had no intention of letting his commander take the full brunt of Nyama's contempt alone. "And there are manufacturing facilities below Red City that he might use to devastating effect. Are you willing to simply stand aside and watch all that happen?"

"The Queen of the Red invited Nuso Esva into her city," Nyama said, sending an acid-edged glare at Parck. "Whatever happens now is on her head, and upon the heads of her people."

He turned back to Thrawn. "I return to my shuttle, Admiral Thrawn. I expect all Stromma under your command to be assembled at the *Admonitor*'s hangar bay within the hour."

"I'll give the order," Thrawn said.

Nyama held the admiral's gaze another two seconds, then stepped away from the table and strode from the room.

The conciliator stood up, his face pained. "Admiral..."

"Go with your superior," Thrawn said, his face impassive.

The younger Stromma looked helplessly at the others around the table, then nodded and left without another word.

"Well," Fel said into the silence. "That went well."

"Hardly unexpected, though," Parck agreed heavily.

"True." Fel cocked an eyebrow at Thrawn. "You do know, Admiral, that I wasn't exaggerating about the size of that gap. You come in at the wrong angle and graze one of those shields, and it'll blow off that section of wing and give you enough spin to send you spiraling straight into the ground."

"I have full confidence that you and your pilots will make it work, Commander." Thrawn turned to Balkin. "As I also have confidence that you and your stormtroopers will do their part."

"We will, Admiral," Balkin said quietly.

"So the plan's still on?" Parck asked.

"It is," Thrawn confirmed.

Parck felt his lip twitch. "I have spoken to some of the other Stromma who understand Quesoth Soldier Speak," he said. "They say that even if we're able to record enough of the Queen's orders during the battle, it'll be impossible to pick-and-stitch the words together to create counter-orders of our own."

"My Stromma trainees say the same thing," Balkin confirmed. "There's some kind of pitch rhythm in the subharmonics that a set of randomly stitched words won't be able to match."

"We shall see," Thrawn said. "Are there any other thoughts or concerns?"

Parck looked around the table. No one seemed inclined to say anything more. "Then you're dismissed," Thrawn said formally. "Make your final preparations, then get your forces fed and to sleep."

His eyes glittered. "Tomorrow, at midmorning, we attack."

It was not in the nature of Imperial stormtroopers to hide themselves from view. Their entire attitude and training, not to mention their gleaming white armor, tended in exactly the opposite direction.

Nevertheless, stormtrooper Lhagva of the Stromma contingent was trying to stay out of everyone's sight.

For the first hour he succeeded, running a quiet path between the *Admonitor's* main trooper kitchen area and the equipment storage facility, choosing a route senior officers seldom traveled unless they had a reason to be there. He kept an ear cocked as he strode silently along, listening for loud voices and stern, determined footsteps.

He was ten minutes into the second hour when his luck ran out. Rounding a stack of safety-webbed crates, he ran smack into Line Lieutenant Dramos Sanjin, perched casually on the saddle of a Mobquet reconnaissance swoop.

"Stormtrooper Lhagva," Sanjin said with an air of clearly artificial casualness. "You seem to have missed the order that all Stromma aboard the *Admonitor* were to report to the Number Three hangar deck for disembarkation."

"My apologies, Lieutenant," Lhagva said, striving for the right mix of surprise and chagrin. "I've been having trouble with my hearing lately."

"Really," Sanjin said. "You didn't seem to have any trouble with Commander Balkin's order to report to the practice range earlier this afternoon."

Lhagva grimaced. Sanjin had him, and there really was no point in carrying on the charade any longer. "I heard a rumor

that all the Stromma were being taken off in advance of the attack," he said. "I wanted to stay."

"You feel entitled to ignore orders you don't feel like obeying?"

"You need me, Lieutenant," Lhagva said, painfully aware that he was walking on extremely thin stone here. "Puriv and I are the only ones in the assault force who understand Quesoth Soldier Speak. We're the only ones who can give you any advance warning of what the Queen of the Red is ordering her forces to do."

"Yet Puriv left the *Admonitor* as ordered," Sanjin said. "Are you saying he doesn't have the same loyalty to the unit that you do?"

"Puriv has a family, and a strong family honor that he must uphold," Lhagva said. "Disobeying his orders would shame them all."

"Whereas you're an orphan who has no one to shame?"

"I'm an orphan who will dishonor no one but myself," Lhagva corrected. "I'm willing to accept that shame."

"Stromma discipline can be harsh," Sanjin warned. "Imperial discipline can be even worse."

"I understand," Lhagva said. "Discipline or discharge me as you must, Lieutenant. But I beg you, don't do either until after tomorrow."

Sanjin studied Lhagva's face. "You feel that strongly about this battle?"

"The Quesoth are Stromma allies," Lhagva said. "More than that, I spent two years in the Stromma diplomatic enclave at the edge of the Black City. I like these people, and I don't want to see them destroyed."

"And you think that likely?"

"If Nuso Esva isn't stopped, it's the only possible outcome," Lhagva said. "If he succeeds in holding the Red City, it'll be only a matter of time before he also takes the White City, then the Black City, and then the entire planet."

"And you want to see him stopped."

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Even at the risk of your own life and honor?"

"I'm an Imperial stormtrooper, Lieutenant," Lhagva said. "I live or die at the pleasure of my superiors."

"And if it pleases those same superiors for you to sit this one out?"

Lhagva swallowed hard, wishing he could read Sanjin's face. But human expressions were always so hard for him to penetrate. "Then I will resign my commission and accompany my former unit to the surface as a civilian," he said. "Stowing away aboard the transport if need be."

For a dozen heartbeats Sanjin just gazed at him. "This hearing problem of yours," he said at last. "Comes and goes, does it?"

It took Lhagva a moment to figure out what Sanjin was talking about. And there was a strange look the human's eye: "Yes, sir, it does," he said. "As I said earlier..."

"Sounds serious," Sanjin cut in. "You'd better report to the medical bay. I'll let the Stromma liaison officer know that you'll be remaining aboard until the diagnostic droids have come up with a reading and a course of treatment." He cocked his head. "I'm sure you'll be ordered to remain in the bay until the assault transports have all launched at midmorning tomorrow."

"Hopefully, my hearing will be functional when that order is given." Lhagva bowed his head. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Don't thank me yet," Sanjin warned. "Better yet, don't thank me at all. If we're both still alive this time tomorrow Captain Parck will probably flay both of us alive. That is, if Commander Balkin doesn't get to us first." He gestured. "Get to the medical bay, and then get some rest. One way or the other, tomorrow is likely to end badly."

It was midmorning, and Trevik was once again holding the nectar bowl at the Queen's side when one of the Storm-hairs came unexpectedly into the Dwelling of Guests with an urgent report.

The forces of Grand Admiral Thrawn had left the star caravan and were moving toward the edges of the Red City.

"Excellent," Nuso Esva said with an almost eager satisfaction in his voice. "All is prepared?"

"All is prepared," the other Storm-hair confirmed.

Nuso Esva turned to the Queen. "Your forces are also arrayed as I ordered, O Queen?"

Trevik's eyes flicked sideways to the Queen's litter. The Queen's Soldiers, as Nuso Esva had ordered? Had ordered?

Such blatant effrontery should have earned Nuso Esva words of sharp rebuke, possibly even death at the hands of the Soldiers standing their usual guard outside the Dwelling. But to Trevik's even greater surprise, the Queen made neither response. "They are so arrayed," she said instead. "You are certain your weapons can stop the invading forces?"

"They will do more than simply stop them, O Queen," Nuso Esva said with grim satisfaction. "Today is the beginning of your final dominion over this world."

Again, Trevik looked sideways at the Queen. But this time, his surreptitious glance was accompanied by a surge of unpleasantness that curled through him like a plume of black smoke. What did Nuso Esva mean by dominion? In two years the Queen of the White would arise, the air would change, and the Queen of the Red would die. The Circlings would go into hibernation in the lower citadel of the palace, where they would arise and breed a new Queen when their part of the cycle came again. Once the citadel had been sealed, the Midlis, Soldiers, and Workers would start the long journey to the White City; there, those who survived the ordeal would join in with the Queen of the White's offspring. Eighteen years later, the Queen of the Black would arise, and the cycle would begin anew.

But the Queen of the Red- the *current* Queen of the Red- would still be long dead. What could Nuso Esva possibly mean by speaking to her of dominion over Quethold?

Trevik had no idea. He also had no doubt that, whatever the meaning, he wasn't going to like it.

The eight transports put down at the edge of the Red City, landing in a widely spaced semicircle in the fields just outside the outermost ring of Worker homes. The arrangement of the semicircle was typically Thrawn, Fel saw as he and his three squadrons of TIE fighters flew cover over the landing site. Setting Sun Avenue, the road that led due east into the city, was the designated entry point, and Fel had known commanders who would have automatically centered

the force on that vector so as to provide maximum flanking cover to the main thrust.

But Thrawn did things with a bit more subtlety. This semicircle was centered instead on a creek that flowed west-southwest across the city, crossing the line of transports about half a kilometer south of Setting Sun Avenue. The gently sloping banks of the creek offered another wide entry point, one that a clever and unconventional commander might choose to exploit. It was certainly a tactic Thrawn might use, and one Nuso Esva would surely anticipate.

Sure enough, Fel could see movement now in the inner parts of the city, the Midli and Circling areas protected by Nuso Esva's umbrella shields. Some of the Quesoth Soldiers who had been deployed there were leaving the center city and moving down the hill along the creek-bed toward the handful of natural strongpoints on the banks.

Fel smiled tightly. Nuso Esva didn't know that most of the transports arrayed against him, including the one positioned along the streambed, were just for show.

"Commander Fel?" Thrawn's voice came through Fel's helmet comlink.

"No resistance so far, Admiral," Fel reported. "I have Soldiers redeploying to the stream, but so far everyone's staying well back inside the shield zone."

"Any of the laser cannons in evidence?"

Fel took a moment to glance at his fighter's compact tactical board, wishing briefly that he was in his usual TIE interceptor with its better instrument array. But of course, the newer, sleeker interceptor wouldn't have worked nearly so well with this particular mission. "Nothing visible," he said. "Shall I make a pass across the larger holes in the shield array and see if I can draw some fire?"

"Not yet, Commander," Thrawn said with that mixture of respect, patience, and amusement that Fel had noted the Grand Admiral always seemed to use with him. "Are we intercepting any of the Queen's orders yet?"

"Negative on that, too, sir," Fel said. "We're probably still too far out to pick up anything from the loud-speakers."

"Stay on it," Thrawn instructed. "I want to know the minute you start hearing Soldier Speak. Armor Commander?"

"Armor Commander," said a flat nonhuman voice coming into the circuit.

"Are the juggernauts ready?"

"They are."

"Deploy juggernauts."

Fel turned his fighter into a tight curve back toward the transport that lay across Setting Sun Avenue. The access door slid up into the curved top of the vehicle and a juggernaut rolled into view, twenty-two meters' worth of weapons and heavy armor, moving a little awkwardly on its ten wheels as it maneuvered itself onto the road. It had stabilized itself and started toward the city when the second tank appeared, following in the track marks of the first. It, too, made it onto the road just as the one behind it emerged into view.

Fel nodded to himself and turned into another curve back toward the city. If the first three juggernauts had made it out all right, he had no doubt that the remaining six would do likewise.

Meanwhile, his TIEs had another job to do. "Gray Squadron, form up around me," Fel called into his comlink. "Blanket sweep over the city. Let's see what sort of holes we can find to shoot through."

The fourth of the nine juggernaut tanks had emerged in the distance when Lhagva's squad rolled out of their transport on the first of the attack force's three A-rack carriers.

The A-rack was a simple device, one that Lhagva was told had been adopted from one of Thrawn's other liberated worlds. It looked very much like an A-frame, fold-up clothing roller of the type he'd seen being pushed or pulled along busy walkways back in his own home city's garment district. The A-rack, though, was much sturdier than those, with oversized wheels, a top-mounted E-Web/M heavy repeating blaster, a center-mounted engine, and enough room on each side for five storm-troopers to stand facing outward. With the pair of cramped seats in the center section for the driver and gunner, the carrier could transport a full stormtrooper squad quickly and efficiently across medium-rough terrain.

The downside, which Lhagva always thought about when he rode one of the things, was that it also left the squad bunched close together and thus vulnerable to ambush.

But so far the enemy here hadn't made any such moves. The houses the three A-racks rolled past were showing no signs of life, not even the occasional furtive peek by a curious face at any of the windows. The Workers were apparently all out of the city as usual for this time of the morning, laboring in the fields, forests, and mines stretching out beyond the urban area.

As for the Soldiers, most of those Lhagva could see from his angle were gathered in clumps along the juggernauts' line of travel a few hundred meters to the north. Their backs were to the incoming A-racks, with no indication that they were even aware that three squads of stormtroopers were coming toward them from the south. It was as if Thrawn had completely blindsided Nuso Esva and the Queen of the Red.

Lhagva didn't believe it for a minute.

"Tighten it up, troopers," Sanjin called from the A-rack's gunner's seat. "Things are about to get hot."

Lhagva shot a quick look upward. They'd reached the outer circle of Midli houses, and the sky above them had gone dark and shimmery as they passed beneath the edge of the city's new patchwork of umbrella shields. From this point on, Commander Fel's TIEs would be unable to provide the stormtroopers with any cover fire.

Readjusting his grip on his BlasTech E-11 blaster rifle, Lhagva returned his attention to the houses and open areas on his side of the A-rack. Whatever Nuso Esva was planning, he knew, the battle was about to begin.

"Excellent," Nuso Esva said, his lips curled back, his faceted yellow eyes intent on the line of eight large monitors the other Storm-hairs had set up in the Dwelling of Guests gathering area. "Thrawn is nothing if not always precisely on schedule." He gestured to one of the monitors. "Observe, O Queen. Here come his soldiers."

The Queen leaned closer toward the image. Surreptitiously, Trevik did the same. The white-armored soldiers were heading northward through the south-western part of the city,

riding on three bouncy and fragile-looking metal frameworks. On one of the other monitors, larger, more substantial vehicles were rumbling into the city along Setting Sun Avenue.

And just like the soldiers, the large vehicles were moving in a straight line. Trevik didn't know much about tactics, but even to him that seemed foolish.

It apparently seemed that way to the Queen, as well. "I will order my Soldiers to attack," she said, picking up the special farspeak that rested beside her armrest, its wires snaking across the room to the connector in the wall. "They will make short work of them."

"Not yet," Nuso Esva said, holding out a hand. "Not yet."

Trevik flinched. The outstretched hand was a signal of command, a gesture Trevik had used many times when overseeing Workers and one that he'd received in turn from senior Midlis and occasional Circlings.

No one ever used such a gesture toward the Queen of the Red. Ever. The very thought of such a blatant insult was both fantastic and outrageous.

Yet once again, the Queen gave no indication of such outrage. "Then when?" she simply asked.

"Be patient, O Queen," Nuso Esva said. To Trevik's relief, he lowered the discourteous hand again to his side. "The enemy fighter craft are about to make their first attempt to enter through my trap. When they do, my soldiers will open fire with the blaster cannons I set up in concealment..."

"The guns my Workers set up in concealment," the Queen corrected him.

Nuso Esva's eyes might have glittered with new fire. Trevik wasn't certain. "The cannons your Workers set up," he amended coolly. "Once they open fire, destroying or scattering the fighter craft, the cannons that I..." - he inclined his head - "...the cannons that your Workers set up along Setting Sun Avenue will destroy the first and last juggernauts in line. Then you will order your Soldiers to destroy the stormtroopers. All is as I predicted."

Nuso Esva turned his eyes on Trevik. "Exactly as I predicted," he added.

"Yes," the Queen said, and out of the corner of his eye Trevik saw her turn to him. Automatically, he lifted the bowl as he likewise turned to face her.

But to his surprise she didn't drink. To his even greater surprise, she continued to stare at him. "O Queen?" he asked, not knowing what else to say.

"Nuso Esva of the First of the Storm-hairs did indeed predict all," she said. "You, Trevik of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red, have betrayed me."

Trevik froze, a horrible flood of fear and shame exploding inside him. She knew. She knew about his brother Jirvin and the others who'd been in the house that evening. She knew about the cam Trevik had brought into the Dwelling of Guests. She knew that Trevik had given that cam to his brother, who had then given it to the enemy Thrawn.

And Trevik knew that he was dead. The Queen would call in her Soldiers from outside, and they would kill him...

"Calm yourself, O Queen," Nuso Esva said calmly. "You're frightening him. At any rate, it's hardly betrayal when his actions are a deliberate and necessary part of a plan."

"His actions may have been a part of your plan," the Queen said, still staring at Trevik. "But in his hidden heart, the Midli committed treason against his Queen."

"We thought he was controlling you," Trevik breathed, finally finding his voice. "I was told he was controlling you."

"No one controls a Queen of the Quesoth," the Queen said darkly. "It is she who controls."

"Which you should have realized from the beginning," Nuso Esva said. "How else do you think that Circling was actually willing to pretend to treason? He acted that way under his Queen's orders so that he could persuade you to take the pictures I wanted Thrawn to have."

Trevik tore his gaze away from the Queen's stare. "To persuade..." he began weakly.

"Pictures of these," Nuso Esva said, waving a hand toward the walls of the gathering area. Even with his alien face and voice it was impossible for Trevik to miss his deep and malicious satisfaction. "Artwork carefully selected to lead our oh-so-clever Grand Admiral to exactly the wrong conclusions about my strategy."

Trevik could feel his breath coming in short, painful gasps. Jirvin had also said that about Thrawn, that in artwork he could read the hidden hearts of people. Trevik had accepted his brother's word, but he had never truly believed it.

Now, as he felt Nuso Esva's triumph wash over him, he knew that it was indeed true.

"You don't believe it, of course," Nuso Esva continued. "No one does. But rest assured, Thrawn is able to perform such magic. The Queen's own confidant and ally stayed aboard the star caravan long enough to confirm it." This time, his eyes definitely glittered. "Before he pulled all of your Stromma allies out of the battle."

"Which he would still have done without this Midli's betrayal," the Queen said.

"Calm yourself, O Queen," Nuso Esva said again. "Let us watch and savor the defeat of our enemy without these petty distractions. There will be plenty of time later to execute this Midli and his friends if you so choose." He turned back to the monitors. "Besides, I daresay Thrawn will have another trick or two waiting behind his back. Watch- and see how I anticipate and destroy each of them."

The sixth of the nine juggernauts had passed beneath the edge of the umbrella shields, and the stormtrooper force was nearly halfway to its target flank, when the order finally came. "Commander Fel, you may initiate your attack pattern," Thrawn said. "Let us see what exactly we have facing us."

"Acknowledged, Admiral," Fel said, turning his fighter into a smooth arc back toward the western part of the city. Thrawn's assumption had been that Nuso Esva would close off the entire umbrella shield array except in the western areas of the city. But even 90-percent-sure assumptions needed to be checked out, and Fel's TIEs were the logical ones to do it. Especially when they had nothing better to do anyway.

As usual, Thrawn had been right. Gray Squadron's sweep had confirmed that the rest of the city was completely covered, with gaps not even big enough to drop an MSE

droid through. Only in the western sector, where Nuso Esva had set his traps, was there anything Fel could use.

With the juggernauts and stormtroopers now in harm's way, it was time for the TIEs to persuade Nuso Esva to start springing those traps.

As it turned out, the onetime warlord didn't need any persuading. Fel was passing over the lead juggernaut and starting to make his turn when the city below him erupted with laser cannon fire.

"Evasive!" Fel snapped, twisting his fighter around as a bolt came through one of the shield gaps and burned past his portside wing. Not that his pilots really needed the warning. "Target those lasers and destroy."

He was cutting dangerously low across the forest of umbrella shields when he spotted the swarm of Quesoth Soldiers appearing from concealment in the ring of Workers' houses directly behind Lieutenant Sanjin's stormtroopers.

The first warning was a burst of Soldier Speak from a concealed loudspeaker a few blocks away. "Soldiers in concealment," - Lhagva called out in translation. - "Rise and attack the white-armored invaders."

"Vec six!" one of the other stormtroopers snapped, pointing his E-11 back toward the edge of the umbrella shield zone. "Looks like- must be a hundred Soldiers, coming out of the Workers' houses."

Lhagva felt his mouth go dry. A hundred Soldiers, against thirty-six stormtroopers. Not good.

"Got another hundred fifty at vec three," someone else put in tautly. "I guess they don't want us heading toward the palace."

"Lucky we didn't want to go in that direction anyway," Sanjin said with his usual calm. "Here comes the vec-null contingent."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the western half of the city suddenly exploded with laserfire as a dozen concealed laser cannons opened up against the TIEs flying overhead.

"About time," Sanjin shouted. "A-racks, stop; gunners, grab the E-Webs. Kicker, find me some useful real estate."

Lhagva turned from the large insectoid beings closing on their rear, their short swords and heavy maces glinting in the shield-muted sunlight, and peered across the landscape in front of them. There was the vec-null contingent, just as Sanjin had said: another hundred or more Soldiers who had left their places along the jugger-nauts' insertion route and were heading toward the storm-troopers.

And that was a direction Sanjin's assault force had been hoping to go in.

Lhagva looked to the west. So far, that area was still clear of Quesoth. If Sanjin gave the order, and if they turned the A-racks and pushed them to the limit, they could probably get back out from under the umbrella shields and into TIE cover ahead of all three groups of Soldiers.

But that would mean running. And Imperial stormtroopers never ran. Not when they had a job to do.

Not even when they were outnumbered ten to one.

"Kicker?" Sanjin prompted.

"Yes, sir," a stormtrooper from one of the other squads called back, his eyes on the portable sensor looped over his shoulder. "One of the shield generators is in there." He pointed at a modest house just ahead and to the east. "Next nearest is over there," he added, pointing to another house to the northwest. "That enough, or do you want one more?"

"Two should do us," Sanjin said, looking back and forth among the incoming groups of Soldiers. "If we can wreck both generators, it should open the sky enough for the TIEs to get under the rest and access the whole city. Squad three, take the eastern house. Squads one and two, you're with me in the other one."

There was another burst of Soldier Speak from the nearby loudspeaker. "North and east Soldiers, converge northeast at weapons site; defend and attack from there," Lhagva translated. "South Soldiers, follow your current track."

"What does she mean, weapons site?" Sanjin asked. "A weapons cache, or one of those laser batteries?"

"I don't know," Lhagva said. "The term could apply to either."

"A laser battery would make more sense," Sanjin decided. "New plan: squad three to eastern house, squad two to

northwest, squad one with me. We'll go to ground somewhere, wait for them to tag the weapons site for us, and try to get in. Smoke grenades; two per enemy force. Everyone ready? Grenades: go."

The grenades had just hit the ground when, in the distance, the rearmost juggernaut lumbering along through the city exploded.

In the dim light filling the *Admonitor's* ground-tac center, a second display flared unnaturally bright and then went dark. "Juggernaut One has been hit," General Tasse reported. "Cam out; telemetry data: it's still moving, but just barely. Another hit like that and it'll be as dead in the mud as Juggernaut Nine."

"Acknowledged," Thrawn said.

Parck stole a sideways look at the admiral. Thrawn was standing in front of the tac board, his eyes sweeping methodically across the myriad displays and status readouts. To all outward appearances he seemed as calm as always.

But Parck knew better. The Grand Admiral's campaign against warlord Nuso Esva had been a long and bloody one, a road littered with betrayal and destruction, new allies and barely thwarted genocide. Now, at long last, Nuso Esva's end was finally in sight.

At least, all indicators pointed in that direction. The once-proud conqueror was trapped on Quethold, with limited resources, no more than thirty of his most loyal followers, and only a single medium-sized ship buried away out of easy reach in one of the mines north of the Red City. The remnants of his once-powerful battle fleet were scattered across probably a million cubic light-years of space, where they would, presumably, wither and die once Nuso Esva was no longer there to command.

And yet:

Parck ran his eyes over the tac board again. Preoccupied with the stream of reports from the scouts searching for Nuso Esva's remaining ships, he'd been somewhat out of the data loop for the planning of the Red City attack. There were undoubtedly a few pieces of Thrawn's plan that he didn't know.

But as he gazed at the turmoil being presented on the boards, he could feel an unpleasant sensation starting to tingle between his shoulder blades.

The *Admonitor* had six squadrons of TIEs aboard, yet Thrawn had chosen to deploy only three of them. He had over three thousand troopers available, not even counting allied forces, yet had sent only three squads of stormtroopers against the Red City's Soldiers. The line of juggernauts now under heavy attack was even more of a gamble.

And Liaison Nyama had been right about the number of Soldiers that Nuso Esva had available. The observers and sensors were registering at least four thousand of them, two thousand along the juggernauts' route, a few hundred attacking the stormtrooper squads, the rest arrayed in a defensive line between the palace and the transports. How could Thrawn have so badly underestimated his opponent's strength?

Or had he? Could it instead be that this long, wearying war against Nuso Esva had so blunted the Grand Admiral's tactical prudence that he was determined to defeat his enemy with the absolute minimum force possible?

Had this become personal?

The thought sent a fresh shiver up Parck's back. Four years earlier, Emperor Palpatine had traveled to Endor burning with hatred for the Rebel Alliance. Four years before that, Grand Moff Tarkin had similarly made the attack on Yavin a matter of personal vengeance.

Both men had died at the scenes of their hoped-for triumphs, their certain victories snatched from their fingers. The Rebel Alliance had survived, and had gone on to turn much of their Empire into the so-called New Republic.

Parck had always assumed Thrawn knew better than to let emotion cloud his military judgment. Could he have been wrong?

"Patience, Captain."

Parck jerked out of his thoughts. "I'm sorry, Admiral?" he asked carefully.

"You're worried," Thrawn said, his voice low enough to assure that his words would be for the senior captain's ears

only. "Worried about the operation..." He looked sideways at Parck "...and by extension, worried about me. But observe."

He pointed to one of the tac display's city overlays. Scattered amid the bright red spots marking Nuso Esva's laser cannon positions and the muted yellow dots of the umbrella shield generators were a dozen glowing blue lights. "The Queen's loudspeakers," he said identifying them. "The sensors in the TIEs, the juggernauts, and the stormtrooper A-racks are all listening for the distinctive sound of Soldier Speak. Every order she gives her troops brings us that much closer to our final thrust."

"Yes, sir," Parck said, trying to filter the doubt out of his voice.

Apparently, he hadn't filtered out all the doubt. "Patience, Captain," Thrawn said with a faint smile. "Patience."

"As I anticipated," Nuso Esva said, his voice brimming again with satisfaction. "You note, O Queen, that as the smoke clears the white-armored invaders are no longer anywhere to be seen?"

The Queen made a grotesque sound Trevik had never heard from her before. "True Soldiers would not flee a battle," she said.

"Nor have these," Nuso Esva said. "They've merely taken refuge in some of the homes, most likely the two or three nearest that contain shield generators. They no doubt hope to destroy or disable the generators before they're overwhelmed by the approaching Soldiers, thereby allowing the fighters overhead to enter your city. Hoping their deaths will not be useless." His eyes glittered. "But of course, they will."

Trevik gazed at the monitor, feeling an unexpected and discomfiting surge of sadness for the invading soldiers. From the earlier speech between the Queen and Nuso Esva he gathered that humans were like the Stromma, where each member had the same free choices that Quesoth Midlis and Circlings possessed. Unlike Quesoth Soldiers, the white-armored attackers were not bound irrevocably by their orders, and therefore could have retreated to safety when they saw the numbers arrayed against them.

Yet they had not. What kind of leader was this Thrawn, that his people willingly gave up their lives at his command?

"The shield generators must not be damaged," the Queen said, lifting her mike. "I will send more Soldiers."

"No need, O Queen," Nuso Esva said. "I have anticipated this move, and have prepared for it. No, keep your Soldiers where they are. The real battle will take place at the line of juggernaut vehicles. You see how the rearmost has already been disabled, blocking the rest from retreat? As soon as the one in the forefront has likewise been stopped, your Soldiers can move against the true prize."

"Yes, I see," the Queen said again. "You didn't say that two of the nine would be destroyed."

"I told you sacrifices would be necessary," Nuso Esva said. "In this case, the loss of two assures that we can capture the other seven intact."

"And seven will be enough?"

"More than enough," Nuso Esva said. "I've seen the strength of the Red City's lower citadel. I doubt that the White City's defenses will be any greater. Seven juggernauts will be more than sufficient to break through the barriers."

"The White City?" Trevik asked, the words coming out before he could stop them. "What? Break the barriers? What is this madness you speak of?"

"The old ways are at an end, Trevik of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red," the Queen said, her voice as calm as if she were asking for a drink of nectar. "Why should I accept death for myself and my city merely because the Queen of the White has arisen?"

"But..." Trevik stared at her. "But the old Queen always dies when the new Queen arises and the air changes. It's the way of the world."

"You're a naive fool," Nuso Esva said scornfully. "A Queen- a true Queen- doesn't simply sit back and accept the way of the world." He held out his hand toward Trevik, his fingers closing into a fist. "A true Queen grasps the world by the throat and squeezes her own destiny from it. Understand?"

"No," Trevik said, the sheer shock of it draining all emotion from him as if a vein had been cut. "But I do

understand one thing: the Queen of the White cannot arise if the Circlings of the White are dead." He looked at the Queen. "If they are murdered."

"It's a matter of survival," Nuso Esva said. "Survival of the strongest. That's how the universe operates, Midli. I have no doubt that the Queen of the White, if given this same choice, would take the same action."

"It will serve all of us," the Queen said. "Including you yourself, Trevik of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red. No more will you and the other Midlis and Circlings need to travel long distances to a new city, many of you dying along the way. You will remain here, in familiar surroundings, living out your lives in your own homes."

"And when you die?" Trevik asked.

The Queen smiled. "I will not die," she said, an unpleasant edge to her voice. "Without the changing of the air, I will live forever."

All living things die. Trevik wanted to say that.

But he couldn't. Not directly to her face.

Not to the Queen of the Red, who was supposed to be the leader of her city, and the steward of all the Quesoth.

She had betrayed them. She had betrayed them all.

But he couldn't say that, either.

"When will this happen?" he asked instead.

"When the battle is over and Thrawn has lost, he will leave," Nuso Esva said. "He'll have no choice. His defeat here by primitives will severely damage the reputation that holds his fragile coalition together, and he and his star caravan will need to travel to other conflicts to take personal charge of those battles. Once he's gone, we'll take our newly captured vehicles to the White City. The Queen of the Red will become the Queen of Quethold..." - his eyes glittered - "...and I will have free access to the industrial facilities beneath the White City. There I will construct vehicles in which I and my Chosen may leave this world and once again carry the war to my enemies."

Trevik nodded, his heart sickening within him. So that was what it came down to. Quethold was to be sacrificed, its stability and the lives of its people lost, so that the Storm-hairs could continue their thirst for conquest among the stars.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it. The Queen had revealed her own thirsts, and there was nothing a mere Midli could say that would change her mind. Nor was he a Soldier, who might fight the Storm-hairs on her behalf.

No, all Trevik could do was stand with his nectar bowl, and watch and listen. And hope that somehow, Grand Admiral Thrawn would be able to win.

Quesoth Soldiers were about as primitive a group of combatants as Lhagva had ever come across. They didn't wear armor, they didn't use blasters or even projectile weapons, and their tactics seemed limited to swarming their enemies in an attempt to overwhelm them with sheer numbers.

But their natural chitinous hides were tough enough to shrug off even a blaster bolt or two unless they were hit squarely in a vital organ, and they wielded their short swords and maces with incredible strength. And they definitely had the numbers for their chosen strategy.

It was also quickly clear that they weren't going to give up the laser cannon emplacement they'd been ordered to defend. Not while any of them was still able to fight.

"Flanking left," Sanjin called over the scream of the stormtroopers' blasterfire. "Lhagva, Shrinks- go."

"Right." Lhagva squeezed off one final shot through the sleeping room window of the house in which they'd taken refuge, then turned and sprinted out the door, down the hall, and into the gathering room, one of the other stormtroopers right behind him.

They were just in time. The Quesoth surge had overwhelmed the three stormtroopers guarding that approach, and a small knot of Soldiers had made it all the way up to the window. Even as Lhagva skidded to a halt and opened careful fire over his comrades' shoulders, one of the Soldiers leaned in and slammed his mace hard across Bragger's arm. The stormtrooper fell with a muffled curse, and the Soldier started to climb in through the gap.

And fell backward out of sight as Shrinks opened fire from Lhagva's side with the E-Web/M from their A-rack. Between the two of them, they drove back the attackers.

Bragger was back on his feet by the time the two newcomers reached him. "You all right?" Lhagva asked.

"Arm's probably broken," Bragger said calmly as he shifted his E-11 to his left hand and rested the muzzle on the windowsill. "I'll be fine."

Outside, the loudspeaker was blaring Soldier Speak again. "Lhagva?" Sanjin called.

"Soldiers of the Setting Sun and Soldiers of the defense: attack and capture the armored vehicles," Lhagva translated. "They must have gotten the lead juggernaut stopped."

"Sounds like it," Sanjin said. "I hope they like what they..."

"Hold on," Lhagva interrupted him as the Soldier Speak continued. "Kill the crews and all the white-armored invaders inside."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Sanjin said with a grunt. "Break time over, troopers. Get back to work."

"Flanking right!" someone warned.

Lhagva fired one last shot through the window at the swarm of Soldiers and then turned back toward the doorway. "I'm on it," he called.

"There they go," General Tasse reported tightly, pointing at one of the displays. "Coming out of concealment: must be two thousand of them."

"The defensive line's on the move, too," one of the others said. "Another fifteen hundred at least. Looks like a few of Nuso Esva's personal troops are in there with them."

Tasse grunted. "Looks like Nuso Esva's decided we don't have anything left in the transports we can throw at him, so he's retasked his defense line," he said. "Figures the more bodies he throws against the juggernauts, the faster he can batter his way in."

Parck winced. Nuso Esva was certainly right on that count. Thirty-five hundred Soldiers with maces would make quick work of even a juggernaut's hatch.

"Admiral, two of the umbrella shields are down," a lieutenant called from the tech board. "Southwest sector."

So Lieutenant Sanjin's stormtrooper contingent had come through.

"Can the TIEs get in through the breach?" Parck asked.

"No, sir," the lieutenant said. "The adjoining shields are angled downward like the ones at the city's outer edge. They're too low to permit any vehicle entry."

"As expected," Thrawn said calmly. "Nuso Esva is nothing if not thorough. What's Lieutenant Sanjin's status?"

"He reports two down," Commander Balkin reported. "The rest are holding for now."

"Order them to continue pressing on the laser cannon emplacement," Thrawn said. "The longer Nuso Esva thinks we're following his script, the longer it will take him to react to the genuine breach."

Parck frowned. "Following his script?"

"Of course," Thrawn said, frowning as if it was obvious. "Why else did you think I let him arrange the art in the Dwelling of Guests and then make it sound like I needed to see it? I wanted him to think that he'd manipulated our operation and had it under his control."

Parck felt a smile twitch at his lips. He should have known it was something like that. As Thrawn had said, Nuso Esva understood him. Or thought he did. "When do you plan to leave his script?"

"Right now." Thrawn pointed at the tac board. "The fourteenth loudspeaker has just been located." He keyed his comm. "Commander Fel, you may begin your run. Good luck."

"Acknowledged," Fel said, baring his teeth in a tight smile. Finally. "Gray Squadron, into your positions. Stent, on me."

He swung his TIE around, listening with half an ear to the chorus of acknowledgments from his pilots as he eyed the cityscape below. Considering some of the traps Nuso Esva had set in the past, he reflected, this one was almost simple. A single opening in the umbrella shield coverage, apparently there by accident, big enough for a TIE fighter to slip through if it came in at just the right vector. And on the same vector, a heavy twin-barreled laser cannon lurking in concealment, ready to blow apart an unwary pilot.

But as was also typical of Nuso Esva, the laser cannon wasn't there solely to seal the flytrap. The TIE pilots had had plenty of time to map the shields and weapons emplacements

in that zone, and Fel had spotted at least eight other, smaller openings in the barrier nearby that the lasers could fire through. Even if an approaching pilot veered off the flytrap vector in time to survive the gunners' first shot, they would have several other chances to finish the job as he flew away. Assuming, that is, the gunners were fast enough and good enough.

Time to find out just how fast and good they were.

By the time Fel had brought his TIE onto the flytrap vector, Stent was in position, forming up fifty meters behind Fel off his starboard wing. Stent was a Chiss, one of Thrawn's people, who had severed ties with his homeworld in order to come out here and serve the Grand Admiral. He was also one of Fel's best pilots, which was why Fel had chosen him for this job.

And the two of them were going to get only one shot at this. Kicking his TIE to full power, jinking back and forth as much as he could while still maintaining his insertion vector, Fel headed in.

He'd closed to within a hundred meters of the flytrap opening when he spotted the telltale twitch of the laser barrels as they made their final targeting lock. Instantly, he did a final twitch of his own, jinking his fighter hard to starboard. The lasers flashed, the dual bolts sizzling past his canopy.

With a burst of fire and shattered metal, his portside wing burst into flame.

Twisting the yoke hard over, Fel spun away to starboard. His momentum was carrying him straight toward the unyielding patchwork of umbrella shields below; twisting around again, he pulled up sluggishly out of his dive.

And as he did so, he flew directly across one of the laser cannon's other firing gaps.

He tensed with anticipation. But Thrawn had been right. The gimmicked wing and its fake fire damage made Fel look fatally wounded, and Nuso Esva's gunners weren't going to bother with a fighter that would likely crash within seconds anyway. Certainly not when they had a much more interesting target coming their way.

Because while Fel had been fighting his burning craft, Stent had lined up onto the flytrap vector and was heading in.

Fel continued his turn, losing altitude and fighting to keep his wobble from getting out of control, all the while wending a twisting path toward the flytrap opening. He finally straightened out into a course more or less level over the city and perpendicular to Stent's own current vector. From Fel's new angle he could see that Stent was coming in at full power, with the same evasive maneuvering that Fel had been trying when the laser cannon opened up on him. Alternating his attention among Stent, the flytrap opening, and the ground, Fel flipped up the protective cover on the add-on section of his control board and braced himself.

For an instant he thought Stent had left it too late, and that Nuso Esva's gunners would nail him for sure. But at the very last second the Chiss pulled up, arcing off his approach vector just as the laser cannon fired. The bolts burned across his TIE's belly as he twisted up and away, clawing for altitude as he passed across one of the cannon's other firing gaps. The cannon spun around, firing through the gap, again just a shade too late, then swiveled to another angle as Stent continued past the emplacement and across another of its firing gaps.

And for the next three or four seconds, as the gunners furiously tracked Stent's apparently random-motion retreat, taking shot after shot through firing gap after firing gap, the flytrap opening was completely unprotected.

As usual, Nuso Esva had been clever. The size of the flytrap had been carefully tailored to allow insertion from but one direction.

Yet also as usual, he hadn't been clever enough: because he'd assumed that the intruder would be a whole TIE fighter, a cockpit/body equipped with the standard pair of large, hexagonal solar wings jutting out on both sides.

Smiling grimly, Fel pressed the button beneath the open safety cover.

And as the explosive bolts blew across the wing connectors, ejecting both wings to tumble to their destruction against the umbrella shields below, he deftly slid the cockpit section of his TIE sideways through the flytrap opening.

Nuso Esva's gunners must have instantly spotted their fatal error. But it was already too late. Even as they tried to bring the cannon around again, Fel rotated on his repulsorlifts and fired a close-in double burst from his own laser cannons. The bolts shattered the emplacement's rotational platform, leaving the weapons frozen in place, pointed uselessly at the sky.

Then, flying low over the houses, dipping and dodging where necessary to avoid the umbrella shields' edges, Fel began blasting the houses where those shield generators were located. The rest of Gray Squadron was right behind him, dropping through the ever-widening hole and joining in the task of systematically peeling open the nice secure lair that Nuso Esva had built for himself.

And as the rest of his squadron continued their destruction of the shield generators, Fel shifted to his own special assigned task. Flying widely across the edge of the city, he began eliminating the Queen's communication loudspeakers.

All of them, that is, except one. For that one, Grand Admiral Thrawn had something special planned.

"There is trouble," the Queen said.

For a few seconds Nuso Esva ignored her as he continued to jabber on his private farspeak in his incomprehensible alien language. Trevik braced himself, wondering what the Queen would say or do at this latest insult to her.

But she sat quietly on her litter, waiting with eerie patience for Nuso Esva to finish his other conversation. The alien talk ended, and Nuso Esva jammed the farspeak back into his belt. "There is trouble," the Queen repeated.

"Nothing that can't be handled," Nuso Esva growled, his voice barely within the limits of civility. "As soon as your Soldiers breach the juggernauts..."

"There is trouble," the Queen said again, much more emphatically. "Enemy aircraft fly free over my city, destroying the homes of Circlings and Midlis. You said that would not happen. You said that could not happen."

Nuso Esva seemed to gather himself together. "Calm yourself, O Queen," he said, more politely this time. "The fighters may have breached the outer parts of the city, but

there's another angled rim to the shield array farther in. That edge will keep them out of the palace grounds and away from us."

"Yet they have entered my city," the Queen persisted. "You said they would not. You lied."

"They won't be there for long," Nuso Esva said. "Unlike the primitive cannons my Chosen have been forced to work with, the juggernauts' weaponry is equipped with computerized sensor targeting capabilities. Once we've gained control of them..."

One of the Storm-hairs by the monitors called something in the alien language. "The hatches are breached," Nuso Esva announced. "Now watch as I destroy the enemy fighters."

Trevik looked at the monitors. One of them showed an image that bounced dizzily while the Storm-hair carrying the holocam ran behind a group of Soldiers through the jagged metal edge where a hatch had once been. The Soldiers rushed inside, spreading aside out of the view of the cam.

Suddenly the image went still. Very still. For a pair of seconds it showed a view of a compact metal chamber, empty except for blinking lights, softly glowing displays, and some sort of small, round-topped metal object at the far end. Abruptly, the image spun around, paused, spun around again, paused again- Nuso Esva spat something vile sounding. "No," he bit out as he snatched up his farspeak. "No!"

"What is it?" the Queen demanded. "What's happened?"

Nuso Esva ignored her, snarling more of his alien speech into his farspeak. The image on the monitor began bouncing again as the Storm-hair with the cam raced to the end of the metal chamber and stopped beside the round-topped metal object. There was a close-up view of the lights and monitors...

"What has happened?" the Queen bellowed.

Trevik shrank back in terror. Never in his life had he heard the Queen shout that way. Never had he realized she could shout that way.

Nuso Esva barely even took notice. He continued snarling into his farspeak, his free hand gripping the weapon belted at his side. Around the room, the other Storm-hairs also had

their hands on their weapons. Trevik tensed, waiting for the Queen to shout again.

But she remained silent. A moment later, Nuso Esva lowered his farspeak, his yellow eyes glittering with fury. "The juggernauts have no crews," he bit out. "No crews, and no soldiers. Their drivers are nothing but droids. Mechanical Workers." He hissed something vicious sounding. "And there are no weapons. All have been removed."

For a long moment the gathering room was silent. Trevik kept his eyes on Nuso Esva, afraid to look at the Queen. "Then you have failed," she said at last.

"I haven't failed," Nuso Esva, turning his head back to the monitors. "The juggernauts are useless to us? Fine. There are other targets that will serve." He looked back at the Queen and gave the gesture of command. "Order your Soldiers to the transports waiting on the ground outside the city. They are to capture the vehicles and kill everyone aboard."

"Do the transports hold the weapons you claim will bring you victory?" the Queen countered. "Or do you simply seek a means of deserting Quethold and escaping back to the stars?"

"Don't waste precious time with foolish prattle," Nuso Esva spat. "Give the order."

"I cannot." The Queen pointed toward the monitors. "The loudspeakers have been silenced. There is no way for my voice to reach my Soldiers."

"What?" Once again, Nuso Esva twisted his head around toward the monitors. "So," he murmured bitterly. "We see now Thrawn's true strategy. He draws the majority of the Soldiers to the juggernauts, where they will be useless to me, then destroys the means by which they could be ordered elsewhere."

He turned back to the Queen. "But as always, his strategy is flawed. If your voice cannot travel to the Soldiers, then you, O Queen, must do the traveling." He gestured toward the Workers crouched beside the litter. "Order your Workers to their places. We travel at once to the juggernauts."

Trevik felt his eyes go wide. "You cannot order the Queen into battle," he objected.

"Silence, traitor," Nuso Esva said, not even bothering to look at him.

"Perhaps Trevik of the Midli of the Seventh of the Red is not the true traitor here," the Queen said darkly. "Perhaps it is you who are the traitor, Nuso Esva of the First of the Storm-hairs. You promised us victory. You promised me eternal life. You have broken faith on both."

"You wish eternal life?" Nuso Esva countered. "Then go to the juggernauts and order your Soldiers to attack the transports."

The Queen gestured in refusal. "No."

And then, suddenly, Nuso Esva's weapon was out of its sheath and pointed directly at the Queen. "Give your Workers the order," he said, his voice deathly quiet. "Or die."

The sole remaining loudspeaker was less than two hundred meters from the stalled juggernauts and the thirty-five-hundred Soldiers standing stiffly alongside them. Fel eyed them warily as he settled his TIE into a defensive hover above the support platform, wondering if they would decide they should take some action against the shuttle that was even now lowering a pair of techs onto the platform beside the loudspeaker array.

But they didn't. They'd been ordered to attack the juggernauts, they'd done that, and they were now waiting for further instructions.

"Patience," Fel murmured toward them.

There was movement by the crushed hatch of one of the juggernauts, and two of Nuso Esva's Chosen stepped outside, their yellow eyes glinting in the sunlight. One of them pointed at Fel, and they raised their blasters.

Fel nailed them both with a single shot. Again, the Quesoth Soldiers did nothing.

Fel gave the rest of the juggernaut hatches a quick check, then did another scan of the area to make sure more of the surviving Chosen weren't rushing to the attack. As Thrawn had ordered, he'd left this particular loudspeaker intact, merely severing the control, power, and communications cables that led to it. That meant the techs not only would have to set up the special Soldier Speak message Thrawn had prepared, but would also have to splice in power from the shuttle's generators.

With Sanjin's stormtroopers still battling for their lives against their own clump of Soldiers, Fel hoped the techs would hurry.

Two streets away, another pair of the Chosen were warily approaching. Fel rotated his TIE a few degrees in that direction and waited for them to come out of cover.

And then, abruptly, the loudspeakers came to life below him, filling the air with a volume and intensity that he could feel right through the lower hull of his TIE as Thrawn's message blared across this part of the city. The message ended and began to repeat.

For a moment nothing happened. Fel held his breath:

And then, all at once, the Soldiers by the juggernauts began to move. Flowing along the ground, more like a dark fluid than a collection of individual beings, they headed up the hill toward the palace.

The Soldiers had once again pressed their way to the house's windows, and Sanjin and the remaining stormtroopers had pulled back to one of the inner rooms to make their final stand when Lhagva heard the faint sound of the loudspeakers over the noise of blaster bolts and the thud of maces and swords. He frowned, wondering at the bizarre message- And then, without a word, the Soldiers lowered their weapons. Turning, they filed quickly back through the doors and the holes they'd battered in the walls, heading out into the city.

Leaving the stormtroopers panting in the middle of an empty room.

Sanjin found his voice first. "What in the void was that?" he demanded.

With an effort, Lhagva worked some moisture into his battle-dried mouth. "You didn't hear the loudspeaker, did you?"

"No, I think I was getting clubbed with a mace at the time," Sanjin said, rubbing gingerly and ineffectually at the side of his helmet. "These things don't block that kind of blow nearly as well as I'd hoped. What happened? Did the Queen surrender?"

"I don't think so," Lhagva said. "It sounded like something Thrawn set up."

"I thought you couldn't fake Soldier Speak," one of the others said as he dropped to his knees beside a fallen stormtrooper, his field med-pac in hand.

"He didn't," Lhagva said. "It seemed to be just a straight recording, taken right from the Queen's mouth."

"Which said?" Sanjin prompted.

"Go through the Dwelling doors," Lhagva translated. "Surround and protect the Guests."

"But isn't that an order for the Soldiers to protect Nuso Esva?" one of the stormtroopers objected. "How's that going to help us?"

"Because," Sanjin said, and Lhagva could envision the other's grim smile behind his helmet, "Nuso Esva doesn't know that."

Nuso Esva was still pointing his weapon at the Queen when one of the other Storm-hairs suddenly chattered in their alien language. Nuso Esva barked something in return and took a step forward. "What did you tell them?" he demanded. "What orders did you give your Soldiers?"

"I gave no orders," the Queen said. "I cannot give any..."

"Don't lie to me!" Nuso Esva thundered, taking another step forward. "An order was given. You're the only one who can give such orders." He took another step toward her. "And now they're all coming here," he continued, his voice suddenly quiet. "Why are they coming here, Queen of the Red?"

"I don't know," the Queen said. "When they arrive, I will ask them."

Nuso Esva snorted. "No. You won't." Abruptly, his weapon spat a blaze of fire, and without a sound the Queen slumped over.

Dead.

Trevik gasped, his body stiffening as he stared in disbelief and horror at the Queen's lifeless form. This wasn't the way Queens of Quethold died. It was never the way Queens died. Dimly through the hiss of blood roaring through his ears and brain he heard the sound of more blasterfire:

"You. Traitor."

Trevik jerked his head around. Nuso Esva was staring at him, his weapon pointed directly at Trevik's face.

And only then did he realize that there were bodies of dead Quesoth all around him. The Workers, Borosiv of the Circling of the First of the Red- all of them were dead.

All of them had been murdered.

"You're going to take a message to Thrawn for me," Nuso Esva said, his voice grim and defiant.

And yet, beneath the alien warlord's determination, Trevik could somehow sense a bitter-edged melancholy. There were four thousand Soldiers marching on the palace, and he knew that his own death marched alongside them. "Tell Thrawn that he may think he's won," Nuso Esva continued. "But with my death, his own will not be far off. My followers are still out there, and they're more numerous than he can possibly imagine. No matter where he goes, no matter where he tries to hide, they will find him. You'll tell him that."

With a supreme effort, Trevik forced words into his mouth. "I will tell him," he promised.

For a moment Nuso Esva held his position. Then, at last, he lowered his weapon. "Go," he ordered.

Trevik was at the edge of the palace grounds, weaving his way through the lines of incoming Soldiers, when the Storm-hairs opened fire behind him.

He had reached the waiting group of white-armored humans when the Storm-hairs' firing came to an abrupt end.

Parck looked up from the report. "So that's it," he said.

"That's it," Thrawn confirmed. "One of the bodies in the Dwelling of Guests was positively identified as his."

Parck nodded, feeling a strange weariness stealing over him. After ten years of sporadic combat, slippery escapes, and unlikely victories across the Unknown Regions, warlord Nuso Esva was finally, finally dead. "What now?" he asked, setting the datapad aside.

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "There's little we can do for the Quesoth except aid in rebuilding the damage to the Red City," he said. "But they should be all right. Historically, there have been several instances when Queens have died

prematurely. Sometimes that induces the next Queen to arise ahead of schedule; sometimes the affected city has to limp on alone until the regular time of arising. But whatever struggles the Red City ends up going through, the people of Quethold will survive. That's what's important."

"Yes," Parck agreed with a shiver. Especially considering what that Midli, Trevik, had told them about Nuso Esva's plans for the planet. He could have destroyed everything, and might even have gotten loose to spread more of his poison across the Unknown Regions.

But he hadn't. He was dead, and it really was over. "Actually, Admiral, I meant what were we going to do now," he said.

"You and the *Admonitor* will be heading back to the Chaos Triangle to begin cleaning up the legacy that Nuso Esva left behind," Thrawn said. "As for me, I can now finally turn my attention to an even more pressing problem than Nuso Esva. Namely, the restoration of the Empire."

Parck winced. Thrawn had returned only occasionally to Imperial space since Palpatine's death. Those trips had usually been short, had always been shrouded in secrecy, and had invariably left the Grand Admiral frustrated by the growing disorder there. Between the incompetence of its own leadership and the steady military pressure from the New Republic, the Empire had shrunk to barely a quarter of the size it had attained under Palpatine's rule.

"You may have trouble persuading them to accept your help," he warned. "Some of their recent experience with Grand Admirals hasn't been all that positive."

"There's someone there I can contact," Thrawn assured him. "Captain Gilad Pellaeon, currently in command of the ISD *Chimaera*. I worked with him before, back when Nuso Esva made his one incursion into Imperial space."

"Yes, I remember," Parck said grimly. "Candoras sector. I also remember that it was shortly afterward that Nuso Esva launched the Braccio campaign and ended up nearly destroying half a dozen species."

"Your recollection is correct," Thrawn said, frowning slightly. "Your point?"

"That Nuso Esva was a vengeful son of a space slug," Parck said. "I don't expect his followers to be any less so. It may not be a good time for you to reintroduce yourself to Imperial politics."

Thrawn shook his head. "Don't worry, Captain. Whatever followers Nuso Esva has left are few and scattered. Without his leadership, they'll slink back into the shadows where they belong."

"Perhaps," Parck said. "It still might not be a bad idea for you to take a few additional precautions out there."

"Your concern is touching," Thrawn said. "Again, you have no need to worry. Captain Pellaeon is a competent commander, and he's made the *Chimaera* into one of the finest warships in the fleet."

"What I meant..."

"And I've also made arrangements to have a bodyguard accompany me when I return to the Empire," Thrawn continued. "Whatever vengeance Nuso Esva had planned, or thought he had planned, it will never reach me."

"I hope not." Parck took a deep breath. He still didn't like this, but he knew better than to argue when Thrawn's mind was made up. "With your permission, Admiral, I'll go begin preparations to contact Captain Pellaeon and return you to the Empire." He smiled slightly. "To *your* Empire."

"Thank you, Captain," Thrawn said quietly. "And don't look so glum. This isn't just the end of Nuso Esva."

He smiled tightly. "It's also the beginning. The beginning of victory."

